

The *Shāhnāme* is Iran's national epic. It is a compendium of Iranian myths, legends, and history. Unlike other Indo-European epics, it is not about a war, like the *Iliad*, or an individual, like the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, or the *Ramayana*. The central character of the *Shāhnāme* is Iran, which it glorifies both as subject and hero. Unlike other classical Indo-European epics, the *Shāhnāme* is not in a dead language. It is intelligible to every speaker of Persian in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.

Following a brief survey of Iranian history from its beginning in the 7th century B.C. to Ferdowsi's time in the 11th century, this book provides a history of the poem and a biography of its author. It offers an explanation of the *Shāhnāme* as a national icon and considers the implications of the poem for the present political tensions that mark Iran's relationship with the West.

"Mahmoud Omidshahar is a world authority on Ferdowsi's Shāhnāme. Very few people anywhere in the world know the Persian epic inside out as well as he does. Omidshahar's Iran's Epic and America's Empire is a bold political manifesto written by a master literary scholar. His steady meditations come at a particularly troubling time when Ferdowsi's birthplace is ruled by chronic autocracy and threatened by military strike. Omidshahar writes with conviction, courage, steadfast determination, and a defiant will to recollect, to remind, and to claim the Iranian posterity."

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"In Iran's Epic and America's Empire, Mahmoud Omidshahar, the master of Shāhnāme Studies, attempts to provide a personal narrative about the substance and meaning of the greatest literary work composed in the Persianate World. Along the way he provides a useful and contentious purview of the pre-modern history of Iran and the life of the composer of the epic, Abol-Ghasem Ferdowsi. Furthermore, Omidshahar not only dispels the common Eurocentric notions about Iran and the Shāhnāme, but also takes on the blind nationalism of his own countrymen who at times are blinded by their own chauvinism. He shows how this xenophobic view has kept some from understanding the essence and nature of the Persian epic and Iran's cultural achievement. Whoever reads this book will be forced to think about her/his own views on the meaning and importance of the Shāhnāme."

Touraj Daryaee (Howard C. Baskerville Professor in the History of Iran and the Persianate World at the University of California, Irvine)

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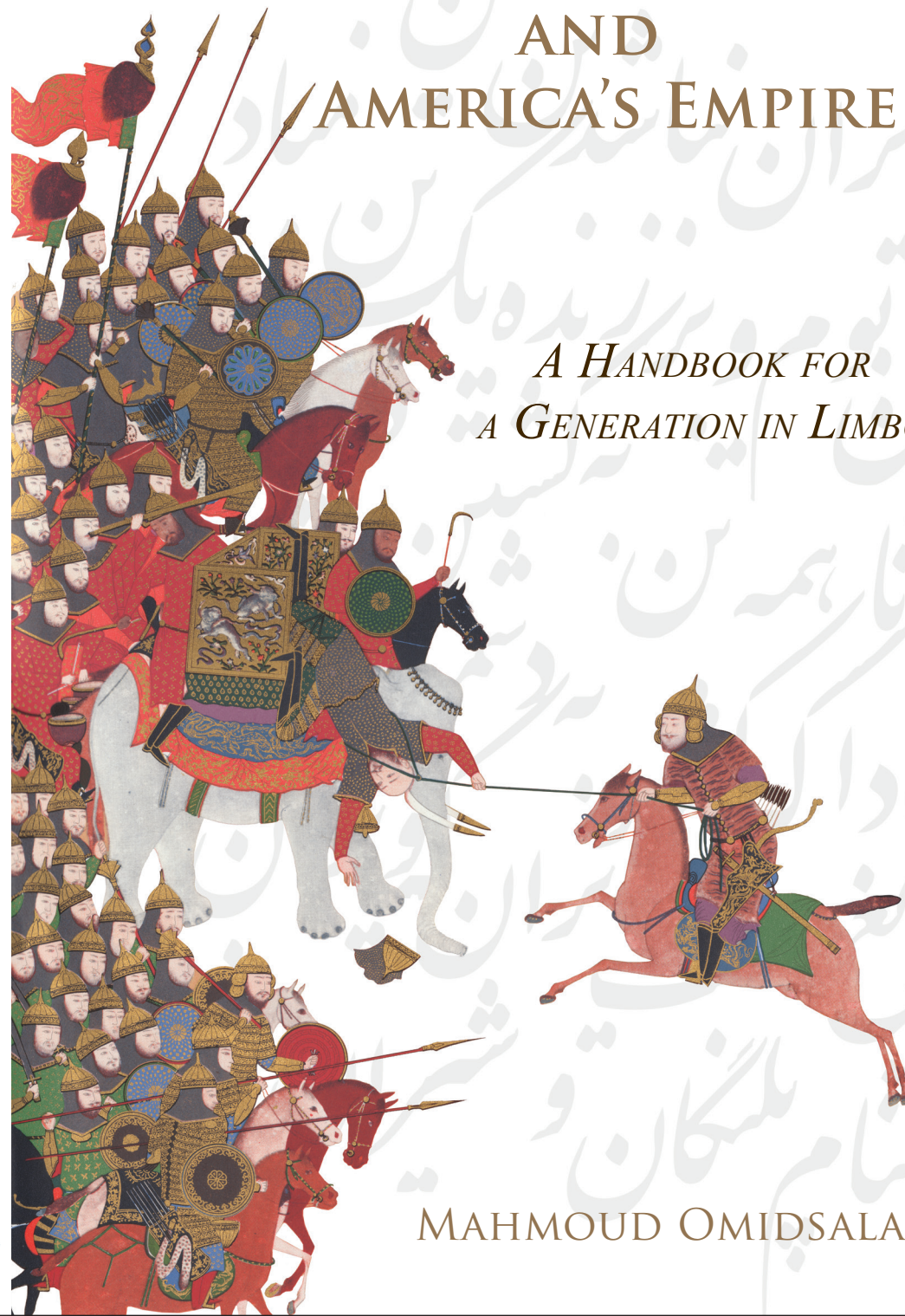


IRAN'S EPIC AND AMERICA'S EMPIRE

MAHMOUD OMIDSALAR

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*A HANDBOOK FOR
A GENERATION IN LIMBO*



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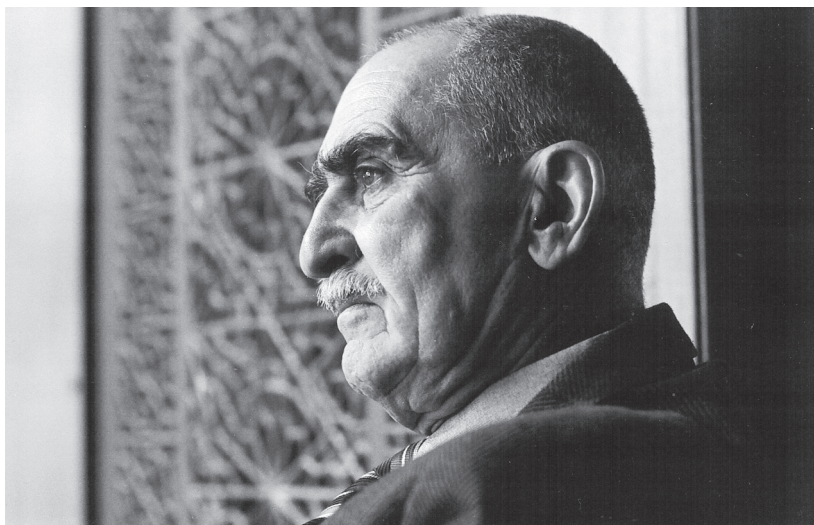
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To Iraj Afshar, Mentor, Friend, Scholar



اگر از دل حصار شاید کرد
جز دل من تو را حصار مباد
مهربانیت را شماری نیست
زندگانیّت را شمار مباد

If one can make a fortress of the heart
May no heart be your fortress but my own—
And may your days there be as countless as
The countless kindnesses that you have shown

(Aghāchi of Bokhara, mid 10th century AD; Translation by Dick Davis)





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Preface

What follows is a meditation on Iran's national epic. It is addressed to the Iranian community abroad, and more importantly to that community's children, many of whom don't speak or read Persian but think of themselves as Iranian. This is an old man's gift to the young in order to help them seize that chain of memory which makes us one people. It is an exhortation to remembrance because human beings are made of memories; recollections of events that happened and also of those that did not. Mankind achieves its humanity and its community in its real and imagined memories, and for us Iranians, the *Shāhnāmeḥ* is the highest poetic expression of that communal remembrance that connects us to one another and anchors our present to a shared sense of the past. It links us to a time of myth and legend that exclusively belongs to us, and to the land that we have inhabited for the past three thousand years. If Iran is our Jerusalem, a place of unrelenting longing in our soul, and if Persian literature is our Torah, then in that Torah, the *Shāhnāmeḥ* is our Psalms. For these reasons and a thousand others no Persian can say anything "impersonal" about the *Shāhnāmeḥ* and no "other" can say anything about it that is *not* taken personally.

To the extent that the *Shāhnāmeḥ* is Iran's national epic as well as her "ethnic history," all scholarship on the *Shāhnāmeḥ* is by nature a com-





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ment on Iranian nationhood and ethnicity. In these disordered times when lies are routinely passed off as truth, and when descendants of those whom our ancestors freed from their Babylonian bondage can presume to threaten us with “preemptive” military strikes and nuclear extinction, the lines have been drawn very clearly.¹ A poem about wars and heroic combat becomes itself a battlefield, a place of confrontation between Persians and those who encroach on the Iranians’ sense of self. This is not a time for weakness, for compromise, or for pseudo-civility. There is nothing civil in military threats.

What I intend to do in this small volume is to walk my countrymen through a brief history of our culture and through all that led to our national poet, Ferdowsi, and to our national poem, the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. Along the way, I hope to disabuse my readers of a number of dangerous myths that have been inculcated by our relatively recent experience with Western colonialism. Following the introductory chapters that briefly deal with Iran’s cultural and political biography, I will take up the relationship between our language and our ethnicity as understood by the general public, and not a few scholars. Drawing upon what we have learned in our brief review of Iran’s history, I will challenge some of the prevailing “truisms” about Persian language and literature, and will show how many of these “truisms” are not merely wrong but border on the strange.

There is a biographical chapter, which is devoted to a consideration of Ferdowsi and his social and cultural milieu. In it, I will tell you that our national poet was not only a great artist, but also a conflicted man often at the mercy of his prodigious appetites and psychological forces that dragged him to and fro. The story of our national history and how it evolved into its present form is told in the next chapter. The final two chapters discuss our relationship to the *Shāhnāmeḥ* as the embodiment of our nationhood.

1 2 Chronicles 36:22 – 23: Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up.” Cf. also Ezra 1:2, 5:2, etc.





Preface

In a lecture entitled “The Hero as Poet,” and delivered in 1840, Thomas Carlyle (1795 – 1881) addressed the heroic nature of great poets.² Ferdowsi is a heroic poet for us. We already admire and revere him as a hero and as a cultural icon. I will suggest that we must also sympathize with him for the tragic figure that he was. In the final chapter, I attempt a synthesis of these studies and speculate on what they may mean for Iranians in the strange world which we inhabit along with Guantanamo detainees and prisoners of the Gazan Ghetto: western civilization’s latest “gifts” to the orient.

Postscript

Professor Afshar, to whom this volume is dedicated, passed away while this book was in production. My only consolation is that he did see a first draft of it and appeared to like it. For me, however, he lives on because whenever I put pen to paper, I feel as if he is looking over my shoulder as I write. Since I have neither the heart nor the inclination to acknowledge his loss, I’ll leave the text of the book as it is and pretend that Afshar is not dead.

2 Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Centenary Edition, London: Chapman, 1897), p. 85.





A Note on Text and Transliteration:

All citations from the *Shāhnāmeḥ* have been taken from Professor Khaleghi-Motlagh's new critical edition (New York, 1988 – 2008). References to the Iranian reprint of Mohl's edition, which originally appeared between 1838 – 1878 in Paris (Tehran, 1975) and to the Moscow critical edition (1966 – 1971) have rarely been provided for textual-critical reasons.

No standard transliteration system has been strictly followed in this book because I have chosen to render word and names as closely to their modern Persian pronunciations as possible. Thus, I have written *Ebrāhim* rather than *Ibrāhim*, and *Rostam* rather than *Rustam*. Only in my quotations from classical Persian verse, I have been a bit more formal in transliterating. Nonetheless, a number of unavoidable pronunciation rules should be explained for readers who may not know Persian.

Persian vowels generally sound more like Spanish vowels than English vowels. Thus, *e*, *o*, *u* should be pronounced as speakers of Spanish pronounce them in such words as *madre*, *mano*, and *uno*. The only diacritical mark that I have used is the macron over the vowel *ā* in order to distinguish it from the sound *a*. Whereas the Persian vowel: *a* expresses the same sound as in the English word *bat*, the Persian vowel: *ā* sounds





like the vowel “a” in the English word *bar*. There are a few consonants in Persian that have no equivalents in modern English. These are expressed by *gh*, *q*, and *kh*. Of these, the first two, namely *gh* and *q*, refer to the letters غ and ق and are guttural sounds that approximately have the sound of the letter *r* in the French pronunciation of the word *Paris*. Persians pronounce these letters as though they were the same letter in spite of the fact that they have distinct sounds in Arabic. I have kept them separate in order to more closely follow the spelling conventions of the Persian language. Thus, I have transliterated the letter غ as [*gh*] and the letter ق as [*q*] although they sound exactly the same in Persian. Similarly, Persian makes no distinction in pronunciation of the Arabic letters س, ص, or ث. To Iranians, these letters all sound as [*s*]. I have generally rendered these letters as [*s*], except in Arabic names and technical words where I have transliterated the letter ث as [*th*] e.g., al-Tha‘ālebi (=الطالبي). The Arabic letters ح and ه are pronounced as [*h*] in Persian, and the letters ذ, ض, ز, and ط are all pronounced as [*z*]. For this reason I have made no distinctions between them in transliteration. The sound that is rendered by [*kh*] is pronounced like the sound of [*ch*] in the Scottish word *loch* “lake,” or alternatively in the German word *doch*. The sound that the letter *s* makes in the English word *pleasure* is rendered by letters *zh*. The letter ع is rendered with a raised ‘ (e.g., al-Tha‘ālebi again). Since greater detail would be confusing for the general reader and superfluous to the specialist, I will leave it at that.

I have assumed that most readers of this volume are quite comfortable with the Western calendar, and have therefore put most dates in the Gregorian calendar, avoiding the standard Muslim or *hejri* dates in most cases. I have presented the Muslim dates of certain events in parenthesis only when I have judged them to be absolutely necessary for contextual or other reasons. In any case, exact dates are unnecessary for the purposes of this book, except in those few instances when exactitude helps make a point. In general, the Gregorian dates that have been given for various events are adequate for the purposes of this book. I have also avoided the awkward CE, and BCE and have stayed with the traditional AD and BC.

Because the talks on which this book is based were delivered to a largely Iranian audience, I have often referred to Ferdowsi as “our poet.”





Iran's national epic and her national poet by definition belong to Iranians and Iranians alone, even though, on a more general level, they may be considered as part of mankind's literary heritage. Any folklorist will tell you that national epics do not diffuse easily from one people into another. They are too closely related to the national and ethnic imaginations of a specific people to be of much use to another. As such, unlike folktales, myths, legends, and a variety of other forms of narrative folklore, national epics do not travel well, and are highly ethnocentric. This is why I have unabashedly kept the possessive pronoun "our" when referring to Ferdowsi and his poem.





Introduction

This book grew out of a series of lectures that I delivered at California State University, Fullerton in honor of my dear friend and mentor, Iraj Afshar. My first impulse was to present the lectures in their original form—brief talks prepared for a largely Iranian audience. After thinking about it, I realized that much of the material would need elucidation and evidentiary support when put into print. The original lectures were followed with protracted periods of questions and answers, during which I elaborated upon points that required further explanation. For publication, I have incorporated numerous elaborations, elucidations and citations to the original lecture material. Interested readers may also wish to consult the reference endnotes. Since this volume is addressed to non-specialists, I have limited the number of these references. However, since most readers of this volume are likely to be educated Persians who can read the language, references from the *Shāhnāmeḥ* and other literary sources have been kept in the original language. But English translations by myself or others have been added for those who do not know Persian. I have intentionally avoided complicated technical discussions in order to make the volume accessible to the non-specialist reader.

My attempt to bring this material to as wide an audience as possible may have produced a meandering narrative. Originally, my three lectures contained deliberate repetitions, and many points which were mentioned briefly and elaborated on later occasions. Since a large number of read-





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ers will not necessarily be specialists, I decided to stay with that strategy. Repeating never hurts when you are trying to communicate complicated issues. In these essays I have laid out the essence of what I have learned during a lifetime of investigating classical Persian in general, and the *Shāhnāme* in particular.

I realize that the tone of these essays might occasionally seem confrontational, and often even harsh. My intention here has never been to offend anyone, or to indulge in *ad hominem* attacks upon specific persons. Whatever arguments I may have with some standards of Western *Shāhnāme* scholarship, they are not meant as personal confrontations. My thesis is simple: too many aspects of Western *Shāhnāme* studies are burdened with anachronisms, biases, inaccuracies, ethnocentric misjudgments, and the sort of misinterpretations that occur when the great temporal, cultural and historical distances that separate contemporary American academics from classical Persian civilization are not sufficiently understood or appreciated. I challenge the point of view behind the conventional wisdom—the *Zeitgeist* that drives it—not individuals who make the argument. Western *Shāhnāme* studies, whether the work of Neo-orientalists or transplanted Iranians who have been absorbed into the group, consistently fall into the same traps of ethnocentric presumptions, technical incompetence, ignorance of classical Persian literature's cultural context, and reductive romantic imaginings. My irritation with these arguments, coupled with my intermittent clumsiness with English prose, may have occasionally produced harsher statements than I mean to make; and for that I apologize to my readers and to any colleagues that I may inadvertently offend.

As I prepared these essays for publication in my twilight years, it dawned on me that it is pointless to try to write something clinical and impersonal about the subject that has consumed most of my adult life. I can no more remain impersonal in discussions of Ferdowsi or the *Shāhnāme* than a surgeon who must operate on his parent or child could stay professionally detached. Hopefully, my emotional involvement with this wonderful subject does not distract my readers.

Let me now say a few words about the man to whom my original lectures and this volume are dedicated.





Introduction

I consider it my great good fortune to have had the benefit of Afshar's erudite and generous guidance over the years and I am delighted to have the opportunity to express a small part of my great debt of gratitude to him in these pages. It is from Afshar that I have learned all that I know about Persian codicology. He taught me the art of looking at the manuscript as a cultural artifact, and also the ability to distinguish significant detail from what only seems important. Afshar is an undisputed master of these skills. Let me give you an example of his acumen. A few years ago, I showed him a very bad Xerox copy of a fragment of the *Garshāspnāmeḥ*, a romantic epic poem composed in 1066, kept at the British Library. The fragment is only a few folios of a larger manuscript, most of which is lost. The folios are badly damaged, and most of their text is difficult to read (fig. 1).

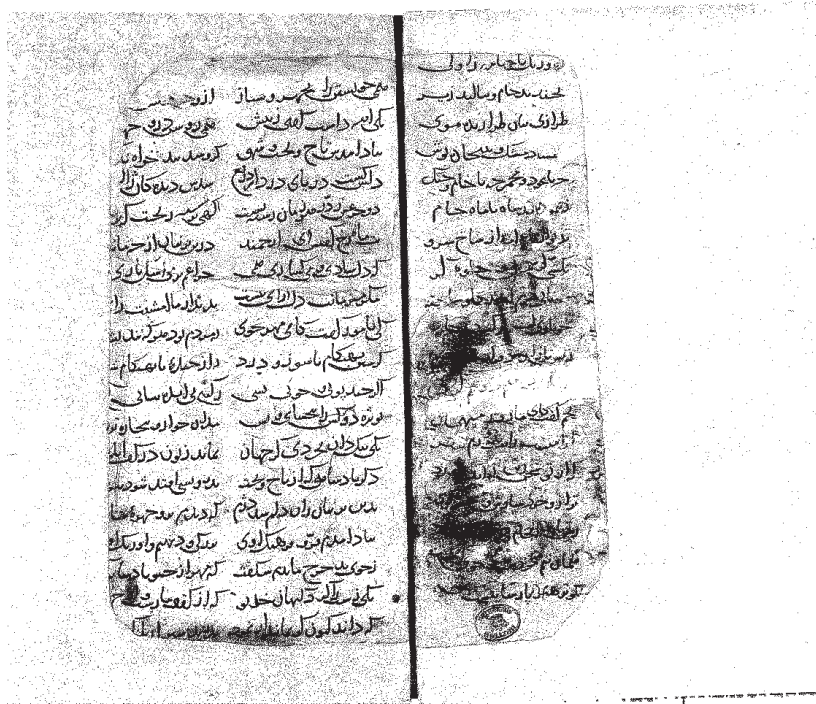


fig. 1: British Library manuscript Or. 11586





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I had carefully studied these pages for many days and had already determined which verses of the *Garshāspnāmeḥ* were written on them. I had also decided that this fragment would be of limited value as a witness in my planned new critical edition of the poem because of the near complete absence of diacritical dots in it.

When I showed these folios to Iraj Afshar, he cast one glance at them and pointed out that the scribe of this fragment always dotted the Persian letter *zh* ڙ (fig. 1, the 4th line to the left). Neither the other scholars who had examined these folios previously, nor I had paid any attention to this feature of the fragment; but it was there in plain sight.

Aside from vast learning and ability to focus on important detail, the most amazing thing about Afshar is that he combines the natural curiosity of a child with the wisdom of an old man. He is certainly more inquisitive, open-minded, and receptive to new ways of looking at old problems than any octogenarian has a right to be. His open-mindedness is as awe-inspiring as his vast erudition.

I don't know if my dear friend, Touraj Daryaei, whose perseverance and devotion to Iranian studies were instrumental to this project, will be cursed or praised for inviting me to give these lectures and for demanding that I write them up for publication. Whatever the outcome, I am grateful to him for his patience and hard work. My son, Alejandro Nariman Omidshafar, found time to read over an earlier draft of this book and made a number of very useful editorial suggestions. My friend and colleague at the library, Mr. Lawrence R. Vogt generously agreed to read every page of this book, and improved it enormously with his editorial advice. He not only corrected my grammatical errors, and cut many a long sentence down to size, but also defanged a fair number of statements which may have proven unintentionally offensive. For all that he has done for this volume, I thank him—though he remains innocent of responsibility for the book's arguments. I am especially grateful to my wife, Teresa Portilla Omidshafar—librarian extraordinaire—who prepared the index for this volume.

Mahmoud Omidshafar
Los Angeles
(June, 2010)

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Chapter 1



History as Fiction

While we read history, we make history.
(*George William Curtis 1824-1892*)

Winston Churchill, the British statesman, orator and historian, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1953, famously said “History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.” History *has* been kind to him; his writings on the British and European history have helped create and elaborate his own legend. History has also been kind to Western civilization for the same reason; westerners wrote it as a narrative that creates and elaborates a saga of Western achievements told along with the tale of non-Western cultures’ failures. As the anthropologist Eric Wolf pointed out, this fanciful narrative teaches:

[...] inside the classroom and outside of it, that there exists an entity called the West, and that one can think of this West as a society and civilization independent of and in opposition to other societies and civilizations. Many of us even grew up believing that this West has a genealogy, according to which ancient Greece begat Rome, Rome begat Christian Europe, Christian Europe begat the Renaissance, the Renaissance the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment political democracy and the industrial revolution. Industry, crossed with democracy, in turn yielded the United States, embodying the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.





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Such a developmental scheme is misleading. It is misleading; first, because it turns history into a moral success story, a race in time in which each runner of the race passes on the torch of liberty to the next relay. History is thus converted into a tale about the furtherance of virtue, about how the virtuous win out over the bad guys. Frequently, this turns into a story of how the winners prove that they are virtuous and good by winning. If history is the working out of a moral purpose in time, then those who lay claim to that purpose are by that fact the predilect agents of history.¹

This Eurocentric view of the past tends to operate on the assumption that the declining non-western world is made up of a collection of spent cultures that passed their zenith long ago. It strongly implies that something happened, which drove these cultures to an unrecoverable free fall and their present misery.² The majority of educated people in the Third World have wholly or partly bought into this scenario. Although they don't exactly know how, most are certain that the European Renaissance was a self-created phenomena that triggered exponential gains in Western progress and left the rest of the world behind.

Some time ago, I went to a dinner party along with Professor Iraj Afshar. One of the guests, an Iranian physician who lives in the United States, asked him, "Why did we in Iran never develop a Renaissance of our own?" The problem with this question, which no doubt occurs to many other Iranians from time to time, is that like all incorrectly formulated questions, it can only lead to misleading or incorrect answers.

The European Renaissance did not materialize out of thin air. It had a global context and was fed by a host of ideas and innovations that were not European in origin or development. In fact, the complex series of conditioning events that led to the European Renaissance stretch back to ancient Mesopotamia, China, Egypt, and Africa. It is simply wrong to attribute Europe's present ascendancy exclusively to Europeans, or think that they created it in isolation. Europeans were around for two thousand years before the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. Throughout this time the majority of them lived in the most squalid, backward, and primitive conditions imaginable. Thus, the roots of European development cannot be found in that fictitious geneal-





History as Fiction

ogy, which traces it from ancient Greece through Rome, to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Much Western “progress” resulted from European interactions with parts of the world that now linger in poverty and despair. India did not produce *only* the sprawling slums of Mumbai and her swarming urban and rural underclass; India is also the source of the Hindu-Arabic numeral system that spread to Europe through Islam, which added algebra and algorithm along the way. Try to calculate any complex numerical equation with Roman Numerals—and without the benefit of the zero *or* higher mathematics. Then ask yourself if the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, or the Industrial Revolution could have been possible with the Roman numerals alone.

Science and technology is thought of as the basis of Western superiority. Let’s bypass Muslim contributions to progress in these fields for now, and briefly refer to a couple of Chinese contributions.

Steel production is largely associated with the names of the British engineer, Henry Bessemer (1813-1898) and the American inventor, William Kelly (1811-1888), who devised a system of blowing air through molten iron for removing its impurities by oxidation. Prior to this innovation a lower and more brittle grade of iron was produced in the West. Kelly, who shares the credit for the invention of the process with Bessemer, had learned his technique from four Chinese steel experts whom he had brought to Kentucky in 1845. These technicians remain nameless and, needless to say, uncredited. The technique of converting pig iron to steel by blowing air through molten iron had been in use in China for more than two millennia prior to its employment in the United States.³

The Chinese production of cast iron is dated to the 6th century B.C., and steel production to the 2nd century B.C.⁴ The per capita production of iron in China is estimated to have risen six fold between the years 806 and 1078, from 13,500 tons in 806 to 90,400 in the year 1064, and to 125,000 by 1078. This next comparison shows that these numbers are far in excess of what Europe was able to produce centuries later.

Two comparisons are illuminating: first, that Europe as a whole would only produce greater volumes by 1700, and that even as late as 1788 Britain was producing only 76,000 tons. Second, the price ratio (measured as a ratio of





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the value of iron to rice) stood at 177:100 in Sung Szechwan in 1080 and 135:100 in Shensi, thereby indicating that the price of iron was low. ... But the striking statistic here is that as late as 1700, Britain had an equivalent figure of 160:100, which was perhaps about a third higher than the price found in the north-eastern Chinese markets of the eleventh century. Finally, in 977 the Chinese price ratio had stood as high as 632:100, indicating almost a four fold reduction in price in the space of just one hundred years. It took Britain over two hundred years, from 1600 to 1822, to achieve a comparable price reduction.⁵

Let's examine some Muslim contributions that have largely disappeared from the historical narrative. Economic development is dependent on the growth of cities, which in turn relies on a society's ability to feed its urban population. In the Muslim world, both the agricultural revolution and its attendant urban growth began in the 8th century A.D. New and improved strains of plants and more advanced hydraulic technology and farming practices were devised, which increased agricultural output significantly. These developments allowed a far greater degree of urbanization, and a major expansion of commerce and colonization among the Muslims. During this exact time, the light of learning and progress flickered out across Europe:

The shattered inheritance of western Rome fell to Western Christendom, then a congeries of tributary polities headed by Teutonic chieftains supported by their bodyguards. No cities survived in Western Christendom compared to Constantinople with at least 200,000 inhabitants,⁶ Baghdad with about 400,000, or Cordoba with 90,000. Although urban crafts had become established in the countryside, the rural zones of Europe had relapsed into subsistence agriculture and localized exchange.⁷

For much of her history, the West was relatively backward compared to societies which now make up the proverbial Third World. But we're not here to boast of the bygone glories of our past. That would miss the point entirely. Iranian readers should beware of extrapolating the inherent superiority of one people over another by relying on the changing fortunes of civilizations. Change is the only constant on this planet; nations acquire and lose ascendancy over time for any number of reasons.





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Maybe there are good reasons for this cultural ebb and flow, and maybe it is a byproduct of a certain treacherous randomness in history. But to mistake a few centuries of Western dominance for inherent superiority undoubtedly leads to the kind of prejudice and cruelty in which European cultures have been as proficient as they have been in their loftier achievements. Being a globe, the Earth has no East or West; and being global, neither does human culture. These notions are artificial constructs that may be serviceable, but must not be taken too literally. Are Japan, China, and India a long distance to the east of the western United States or a shorter distance to the west of it?

Viewed in the larger context of world history, the few centuries that constitute the European Renaissance and western ascendancy are mere moments in time. If European achievements over the last 400 years are proof of innate superiority, does European backwardness over the previous millennia indicate hopeless inferiority?

History may be compartmentalized, chopped up into manageable pieces, and reduced to artificial periods in order to facilitate its study. But the pieces should not be mistaken for the whole. History is a collection of messy, confused, and interconnected events that together merge into the colossal story of mankind. Historical periods are not inherent to history. They are merely conceptual constructs that we impose upon it. To assume that the European periods of Renaissance and Enlightenment were times upon which the non-Europeans should gaze with envious longing, is rooted in ignorance of the cultural circumstances of those times. Asking why Iran did not experience the Renaissance, as did the Iranian doctor with whose question I began this chapter, misses the point entirely. Iran's past discoveries did not require the rediscovery and recovery that the West needed because we did not have a "dark ages." Let's follow this long but necessary digression with another one, about a peculiarity of European Enlightenment.

Broadly speaking, the Age of Enlightenment refers to the period in western intellectual history when the sources of legitimacy and authority gradually shifted from religious institutions to human reason. The beginning of this period is usually placed sometime in the 1600s, often near the publication of Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (1637),





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and its end is assigned alternatively to Voltaire's death in 1778, to the French Revolution in 1789, or to the Napoleonic Wars (1804-1815). Whatever its chronology, the Enlightenment is imagined to be reason's triumph over ignorance, superstition, and the Christian Churches' tyrannical authority. But a lot more than a triumphant march of reason was going on during the Enlightenment. It coincided with the last part of the nightmarish period of witch hunting, more appropriately known as the witch craze.

The persecution, trial, torture and execution of witches in Europe lasted for some five hundred years, from the 13th to the 18th centuries. Tens of thousands of innocent victims—mostly older women—were arrested, tortured, tried, and murdered, or worse, burned alive throughout Europe. Let me give you a glimpse into what went on by summarizing the heartbreaking account of the trial of an old woman who was accused of witchcraft.⁸

On Thursday, April 7, 1611, a 70-year-old woman by the name of Barbara Rüfin was arrested and brought into the city of Ellwangen in Southern Germany on suspicion of witchcraft. Frau Rüfin was charged with desecrating the host, a small piece of flatbread that is thought to contain Christ's body. She freely admitted that she had problems with keeping the host in her mouth, and often had to adjust it in order to prevent it from falling out. It was revealed during the official investigations that her husband had occasionally called her a witch. Although the man told his interrogators on April 9th, that he called his wife a witch only when he was angry with her, it made no difference. During the next few days a number of neighbors and family members came forth to denounce the old lady as a witch, and by the following Tuesday, April 12th, 1611 Frau Rüfin was officially charged with having attempted to murder her son, and also of killing cattle by applying poisonous or magical salves to them. The number of testimonies against her grew, and soon it was revealed that even her son had called her *ein alte Unhold* (an old witch)⁹ during an argument.

Barbara Rüfin denied all accusations, but by Wednesday, April 20th, the examiners felt there was enough evidence against her to justify the use of torture in order to elicit a confession. Subsequently, she was





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put to the rack twice on that day, and her frail 70-year-old frame was stretched for 15 minutes each time. In spite of the agonizing pain, she continued to insist on her innocence and expressed her confidence that God would, in his mercy, confirm her blamelessness by some sign. Her tormentors, however, continued to torture their helpless victim, who finally broke down and on Friday, April 22nd, having been subjected to horrific punishment seven different times in the same day, confessed to all charges that were brought against her. She admitted to desecrating the host, having had sex with the devil, attempting to poison her son, having made a pact with Satan, and also to using witchcraft to ruin the crops. More importantly, she implicated a number of others as her accomplices. In spite of these admissions, when she was interrogated without torture on the next day, April 23rd, she recanted her previous confession, and the officials deemed it necessary to torture her again. Under torture, she gradually broke down and admitted all that she had recanted before.

By Monday, April 25, Barbara was a broken and confused old woman who not only confessed to attending witches' dances, but also showed her torturer, Meister Wolff, a devil's mark on her foot. She remained helpless and confused throughout the rest of her ordeal that mercifully came to an end on Monday, May 16th when she was finally put to death by the sword. Her body was then burned and her ashes scattered. All this happened in the early years of the Enlightenment, "with the full benefit of developed legal procedures and at a time when Shakespeare, Galileo, and Descartes were all alive."¹⁰

I don't have the interest—or the stomach—for a more detailed study of this ignorant, fatal nonsense, along with other organized forms of Western cruelty since the Renaissance. What is important for our purposes is that nothing in Islam's history comes remotely close to the brutality and mass sadism of the European witch craze, the Inquisition, and the various crusades. Naturally, we can't conclude from all this that Muslims are incapable of the organized heartlessness and sadism that the Europeans have been practicing upon the world since they emerged from their medieval stupor. What *may* be argued, however, is that the wistful fascination of non-European intellectuals with recent Western





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achievements may be misplaced. The West's glittering facade has drawn many into the error of confusing political preeminence with moral ascendancy and cultural superiority.

The myth of Western supremacy is systematically promoted in history textbooks, political discourse, and scholarship. American politicians are evidently required by unwritten law to vociferate on a daily basis about "America's moral leadership" or her "moral high-ground." Their bloviating may be needed to diffuse the stench from the daily carnage produced by America's missiles in Pakistani, Afghan, and Iraqi villages and in the Gaza Ghetto. Disregarding the fact that moral leadership is to be earned rather than asserted, the West has been mercilessly imposing her will and mistaking that imposition for moral leadership. This has been going on with the help of prodigious arsenals since the start of the West's southern and eastward expansion. Since no man can willfully kill, oppress, or otherwise harm fellow humans without becoming a criminal, the West has systematically redefined all non-Europeans as sub-human, and has constructed a complex set of theoretical support to absolve herself of wrongdoing. For instance, the assertion that nationalism is an 18th century Western European phenomenon implies that Europe's imperial expansion into non-European territories was not theft of other people's lands. After all, since non-Europeans do not have "nationalism" they also do not have nations. Therefore, Europe's takeover of African, Indian, or Middle Eastern territories was only an expansion into lands to which the inhabitants had neither nationalist attachment nor legal claim. In its purest forms, this fantasy has led to a denial of the native's existence. Golda Meier famously justified the occupation of Palestinian lands by claiming that:

There were no such things as Palestinians ... It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist.¹¹

The danger of buying into the West's myths in the name of any imported ideology is that we become collaborators. Whether it is agreeing with the notion that nationalism and nation-states are exclusively





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Western ideas, or yielding to yearnings for a Renaissance of our own, the outcome is the same: we negate ourselves, and upon our knees, allow Europeans to define us in *their* terms. Allowing the Europeans to define our culture, history, and literature according to Western standards, would imply a tacit acceptance of Western superiority.

I began this chapter by quoting an Iranian expatriate who asked Professor Afshar why Iran did not have her own Renaissance. I have heard this query voiced by a thousand others who asked it in a thousand different ways. The easy answer to the question is, Iran had her own Renaissance much earlier than Europe, but the features of that earlier Renaissance are obscured by a fanciful narrative of Iranian history, which is made up of contradictory parts that are kept together by sheer willfulness. A narrative that is part Marxist propaganda, part inferiority complex, and part uncompromising ethnocentrism.

Before moving on to the next chapter, let me repeat that the reason Iran did not produce a European-style Renaissance is that she did not need to because she did not have a European-style Dark Ages. But the Renaissance is not the only thing that Iran did not produce. Iran also mercifully failed to produce the horrors of the Inquisition, the consuming cruelty of the witch-hunts, the genocides of the Amerindian populations, and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the prodigious carnage of two world-wars, a six-million victim holocaust, the killing fields of the so-called “war on terror,” and the horrors of the on-going ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population. I’d say that’s a series of failures to be proud of.

The American Neocon, Richard Armitage, who spent time in Iran before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, recalled that “the Iranians had a huge sense of themselves. I’ve never met a more ethnocentric people in my life.”¹² Using our country’s most important literary icon, our national epic as a springboard, I will challenge the first two components of the narrative to which I alluded before and will argue for divesting its third component, the ethnocentric part, from racist elements that have crept into our worldview from the West. Enduring ethnic histories are made of myth and memory because without memory, as Anthony D. Smith wrote, there can be no identity, as there can be no





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collective purpose without myth, and no nation without both memory and myth.¹³ If Iran is to survive the incessant encroachment of the West upon her soil and soul, she must reclaim both her myths and her memories. Nothing else will do.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Eric R. Wolf. *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 5.
- 2 Bernard Lewis'. *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) is only one among many of such texts.
- 3 Robert Temple. *The Genius of China* (London: Prion Books, 1999), p.49.
- 4 Tsun Ko. "The Development of Metal Technology in Ancient China," in Cheng-Yih Cheng (ed.) *Science and Technology in Chinese Civilisation* (Singapore: World Scientific, 1987), pp.229-238.
- 5 John M. Hobson. *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.51-52. I have relied on Hobson's scholarship for most of the data on economic history.
- 6 Josiah C. Russell. "Late Ancient and Medieval Populations," in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* (Philadelphia), vol.43, No.3. For data on the cites of Baghdad and Cordoba, see Robert M. Adams. *Land Behind Baghdad: A History of Settlement on the Diyala Plain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p.115 and Josiah C. Russell. *Medieval Regions and Their Cities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), p.178.
- 7 Both above sources have been cited by Eric R. Wolf. *Europe and the People Without History*, p.103.
- 8 This account is taken from H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany 1562-1684*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), pp.101-103. For other accounts of the aptly named *Witch Craze* see the following publications and their bibliographies. Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials, Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Cultures, 1300-1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London/New York: Longman, 1987). The "main contours" and a number of important interpretations of the practice are laid down quite succinctly in James Sharpe's *Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (London: Longman, 2001), pp.4-10. See also Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Eds.) *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Period of the Witch Trials* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). For an account of the witch trials in the United States see John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (Updated edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Penalties for witchcraft and sorcery were finally abolished in 1813. See Wolfgang Behringer, *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria: Popular Magic, Zealotry and Reason of State in Early Modern Europe*, trns. J. C. Grayson and David Lederer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.387.
- 9 Spelling of names and words in the documents of Barbara Rüfin's case vary throughout.





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- 10 Daniel N. Robinson. *Wild Beasts & Idle Humours: The Insanity Defense From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), p.74.
- 11 See *Sunday Times* (London) 1969-06-15 and *The Washington Post* 1969-06-16.
- 12 James Mann. *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004), p.87.
- 13 Anthony D. Smith. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p.2.





Chapter 2



Alexander: From Assault to Assimilation

زمینِ گرگشاده کندراز خویش بپیماید اندازهء کاز خویش
کنارش پُر از تاجداران بُود برش پُر ز خونِ سواران بُود
پُر از مردِ دانا بُود دامنش پُر از خوب رخ، چاکِ پیراهنش
(شاهنامهء فردوسی)

If earth revealed its secrets,
Displaying everything from first to last,
Its bosom would be found filled with kings,
Its breast stained with blood of cavaliers
Its skirts with men of lore
The creases of its robe, with fair-cheeked beauties
(*The Shāhnāmeḥ*)

Nationalism tends toward self-caricature when taken to an extreme. The most common form of Iranian hyper-nationalism greatly exaggerates the time-frame of our country's past, and then concocts a much older and largely mythical Iran that turns her history into heroic parody. A simple search in Google, using the Persian words تاریخ ایران (Iranian history), results in millions of hits. A vast number of these refer to Iran's four, seven, and even fifteen thousand years of history.¹ Print sources are not much better than the internet in this respect. The title of a four-volume study on Iranian





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history—in its 13th printing as of 2009—states that the country’s history stretches back ten-thousand years.² These outlandish claims are harmful and misleading fantasy.

Exaggerating the country’s age from less than three thousand years, to four, seven or ten millennia betrays a fondness for the curious notion of “older is better”—a cousin of the American idea of “bigger is better.” It implies that people with longer histories are superior to others and loses sight of the fact that any existing group of humans stretches back to the beginning of human history, no matter how “primitive” it may seem to others. Exaggerating the sheer length of Iran’s history is no celebration of the country’s appeal or achievements. It is no more than mere mendacity.

Most of our young people tend to get their information from the unregulated world of the internet, and end up believing exaggerated accounts of Iranian history. Many who rely on books often lack the background or training to distinguish authoritative sources from unreliable nonsense. So I will present a brief synopsis of Iranian history before going on with my discussion of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. I have divided this account into three parts. The first part covers our story from the beginning to the overthrow of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great in 330 B.C.; the second briefly narrates the events between Alexander’s death and the Arab invasion of our country in the seventh century A.D.; and the third describes what happened between the Muslim invasion and the age of Ferdowsi.

I. A New People in an Old Land:

Iranians are the only Indo-European people in the Middle East, and unlike Arabs and Israelis who communicate in Semitic tongues, and the Turks who use a Turkic language, Persians speak an Indo-European language. Indo-European languages are spoken by peoples who inhabit the Indian subcontinent in the east, and Europe in the west. Several thousands of years ago a group of Indo-European speakers separated from the rest; their language gradually changed to what is called the Indo-Iranian branch. In time, this Indo-Iranian language branched off into Iranian (Persian, Kurdish, Sogdian, Pasto, Baluchi etc.) and Indic (e.g., Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, etc.) as its speakers branched into distinct groups over many centuries. It is crucial to understand that speaking an Indo-Eu-





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ropean language is not the same thing as being either Indian or European. It only means that various Iranian languages belong to the family of languages which also includes Indian and European tongues. More importantly, after eons of cross-breeding and intermarriage among different human groups, speaking an Indo-European language has no racial connotations whatsoever. In other words, speaking an Iranian language is not the same thing as being an "Aryan," as so many Iranians are quick to point out to anyone who is willing to listen. "Aryan" as a racial or ethnic category is an apparition that slithered out of the most gruesome delusions of western European ethnocentrism. The history of the term is covered with *gore*—not glory, and most civilized people would loath to associate themselves with such a term. More on this later. For now, all we need to know is that Persian is an offshoot of Indo-Iranian, which further derives from Indo-European, and that these are strictly *linguistic* classifications. There is no racial-cultural *value* to any of it. Speaking one language as opposed to another does not make you better, smarter, more "advanced," or even slightly more attractive.

The original homeland of the Indo-Iranians was probably somewhere in or around the present day Kazakhstan, out of which they immigrated south and east. It is not clear why they left their original homeland. Some believe population growth drove bands of them out in search new pastureland for their flocks. Others imagine that they were forced out by invading peoples, or by internal strife. Whatever the reason, the migrating bands of Indo-Iranians reached the borders of western Iran sometime around the middle of the second millennium B.C. some time after their arrival, the tribes split into two large groups. One of these migrated east and northward into India through Afghanistan and gradually evolved into the Indic branch of the Indo-Iranian peoples. The other moved into Iran proper, gained control of the area, and slowly became the Iranian branch. This group also gave its ethnic name to the new homeland, and that is why this country where our ancestors ended up came to be called Iran.

Historians generally believe that the Iranian tribes entered their present homeland some time in the 9th or 10th centuries B.C. An inscription from 835 B.C.³ by an Assyrian king named Shalmaneser III (r. 859-824





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B.C.) indicates that Medes and other Iranians must have been in the area for some time. Based on this evidence, it can be safely assumed that they arrived in the area between the 9th and the 10th century BC. Given these dates, one cannot seriously speak of Iran's five, seven, or ten thousand years of history.

The territory in which the Iranian branch of the Indo-Europeans finally settled was populated by native peoples who had enjoyed a civilized and urban lifestyle before the arrival of the Iranian tribes. Therefore, the Iranian conquerors cannot take credit for the achievements of these ancient civilizations any more than the artistic, literary, and scientific achievements of pre-Mongol Iran can be credited to the Mongol invaders. So, yes, it's okay to talk about the several millennia of civilization on the Iranian plateau, as long as it's clearly understood that much of that civilization was not Iranian at all. These non-Iranian peoples and cultures that inhabited the plateau had created a highly functional civilization long before the conquering Iranian tribes showed up and expropriated much of it. A very useful "Chronological Table of Events" that has been included in the main article on Iran in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Vol.13, pp.247-293) indicates that caves of western Iran show evidence of human habitation from around 100,000 B.C., with evidence of settled village agriculture, in 8,000 B.C., and even wine-making in 4500 B.C. These achievements, and many others, have nothing to do with Iranians *per se*, except that Iranians had sense enough to make use of them. However, expropriation should not be confused with innovation.

Although Iranians entered the scene as effective warrior invaders, at the time of their arrival they had not developed either literacy or permanent settlements. They were probably marauding bands of warrior tribesmen, who depended primarily on cattle-herding and warfare for their livelihood. In time, our warrior ancestors adopted the way of life that the more advanced peoples in their new homeland had created. The conquerors adapted and developed urban social organizations that culminated in 625 B.C. with the Median Empire.

The Medians ruled western Iran until 549 B.C. Then Cyrus the Great, king of Anshān, an area north-west of modern-day Shiraz, defeated the Median ruler and united the kingdoms of Persia and Media. This empire





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is now called the Achaemenid or the Persian Empire (559-330 B.C.). The integration of the Medes and the Persians was a reasonably smooth process. Many members of the Median nobility entered Cyrus's service and rose to positions of prominence in his administration.⁴

The Persian kingdom was one of the larger and more permanent empires of the ancient world (fig. 2). Its area, estimated at about 2,000,000 square miles, stretched from the borders of India to Libyan North Africa.⁵ The Achaemenids ruled for nearly three centuries, from 624 to 330 B.C. Then the last of them, Darius III, was assassinated by his own nobles during his wars with Alexander.

The Achaemenid Empire relied on a bureaucracy that managed its different satrapies or administrative divisions from a central seat of government. It was probably modeled on the administrative apparatus of the great Semitic empires that held the Middle East before Iranians came into the area. The Achaemenid tradition of centralized imperial bureaucracy, which was later imitated by Iran's Sassanid rulers (224-651 A.D.), has important implications for the later development of Persian language and for Iranians' sense of identity. I'll get back to these points later.

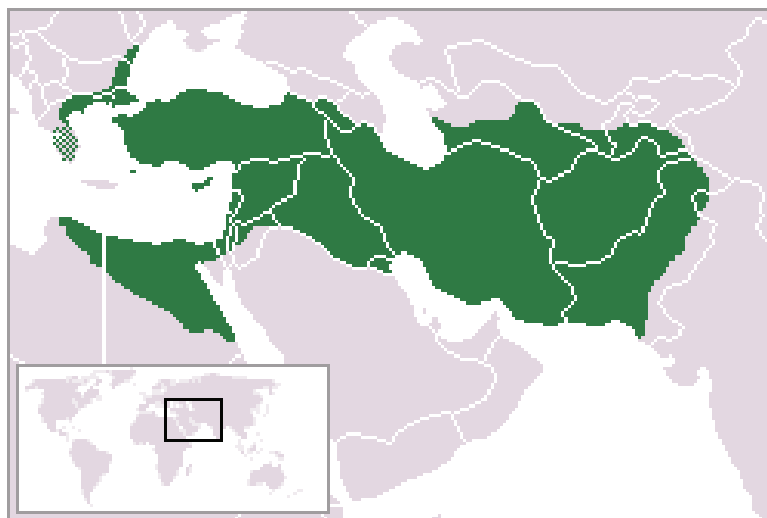


Fig. 2: The Achaemenid Empire





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II. Absorbing the Shock:

Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire was a defining moment in the history of the country, and it continues to vex many of us. That an event which took place over two thousand years ago should trouble contemporary Iranians is both astounding and incomprehensible to most of our non-Iranian friends and relatives. They can't understand why Persians are so sensitive about something that happened so many centuries in the past. The average American considers an event that happened a few centuries ago as too ancient to be significant. But to us, memories of even ancient events remain compelling. Alexander's invasion of Iran in the 4th century B.C. is as traumatic as the Arab assault of the 7th century A.D., the Mongol offensives of the mid 13th century A.D., or the CIA engineered coup of 1953. All of these awful events are felt as *insults*: as bad as the current threats of slaughter and annihilation that are hurled at us over the type of research on nuclear energy our scientists conduct.

Seduced by history, and drawn to it like moths to the flame, we remain prisoners of our past, fastened to it by chains of myth and memory that are at once our fetters and the umbilical cord that sustains our national soul. This historical hyper-awareness has its dark side: there is an inherent danger that myths may be allowed to *create* memories rather than just color them with nuance. Myths about Alexander's invasion of Iran fester as a nasty sore in our collective soul; let's try to find the real Alexander within the fog of his Persian campaigns. We will use a brief chronological account to cover what he did in our country.⁶

Alexander (356-323 B.C.) inherited all of the resources that he so brilliantly used in his career from his father Philip of Macedon (382-336 B.C.).⁷ Even the idea of invading Persia had been conceived by Philip before Alexander took it up.⁸ The war against Iran was not as clear cut a fight between "us" and "them" as most Iranians imagine it to be. The core of the Achaemenid infantry units under the later kings of this dynasty was made up of Greek and Balkan mercenaries rather than Persian soldiers.⁹ Moreover, contrary to what most Iranians believe, Alexander did not march into a unified and peaceful empire, ruled by beloved kings. Revolts in Asia Minor and Egypt had greatly weakened the empire before his arrival. Persian politics had been pushed off a cliff by the machinations





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of Bagoas, the royal vizier. This sinister eunuch assassinated Emperor Artaxerxes III, killed most of the royal family, and put the king's youngest son on the throne as his puppet. Bagoas then killed this puppet-king, and his treaturious action intensified Persian chaos and dynastic confusion. Finally, another prince, a descendant of Darius the Great, ascended the throne and took the dynastic name of Darius III. As soon as Darius III secured his position in 336 B.C., he had Bagoas executed.

So it is fair to say that the Macedonian attack did not come out of thin air. It was the chaotic state of Persian politics which allowed Philip and his allies, even before Alexander, to feel that they could confidently wage war on Persia. They intended to avenge the ravages wrought upon their country by Xerxes in the previous century, and also to free the Greek cities of Asia Minor from Persian control. To achieve these goals and perhaps also to test the empire's peripheral defenses, Philip dispatched an expeditionary force of 10,000 Macedonians under the command of the veteran general Parmenio, who crossed the Hellespont into Asia Minor in the spring of 336 B.C.¹⁰ However, Philip's assassination in the fall of 336 B.C. prevented him from realizing his plans, and it fell on Alexander to take charge of his father's campaign.

Alexander's assault on the Achaemenid Empire was carefully considered, cleverly planned, and daringly carried out. In spite of its many weaknesses, the Persian Empire commanded the sea through its considerable naval superiority. Its fleet of 400 war-ships overshadowed the 160 vessels of the Greeks throughout the Mediterranean.¹¹ Because of the Persian dominance at sea, Alexander prudently decided to launch a land attack upon the empire's ports along the Mediterranean shore in order to deny the enemy's naval forces the opportunity to resupply. This was a sound plan because in ancient warfare, naval forces depended on large crews for rowing and could not operate for any length of time without frequent re-provisioning at port.¹² Ancient navies were not independent military forces, but mere extensions of land power at sea. Alexander was quite aware of these facts and had even told his father's old general Parmenio, who was now in his service, that he aimed "to conquer the Persian fleet from the land."¹³ It was only after he had achieved his "land conquest" of the Persian fleet along the Mediterranean coast that he felt confident





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enough to cross into the Asian holdings of the empire.

Alexander's ground forces were comparatively smaller than the Persians. When he made his move in 334 B.C., he had between 30,000 to 32,000 infantrymen and probably 5000 cavalry. Even including the soldiers of the earlier expeditionary force to which I alluded before, the total strength of his army could not have been much more than 50,000 infantry and cavalry.¹⁴ Soon after he crossed into Iran, Alexander began a series of decisive battles that doomed Darius and the Persian Empire.

Alexander first engaged the Persians at the battle of Granicus (334 B.C.), which was fought near a river of the same name. The Granicus still flows in Turkey, where it is known by the name of *Biga Çayı*. In this first major battle, Alexander faced a force of 40,000 soldiers loyal to the Persian throne. This army was led by the Greek mercenary general Memnon, who commanded an impressive and experienced host of Greek mercenaries. Memnon had arrayed his forces along the opposite bank of the Granicus: a front line of Persian cavalrymen, backed by the corps of mercenary Greek foot soldiers. He was in place, waiting for Alexander's forces to launch a direct frontal attack across a river against a heavily defended shoreline. Needless to say, such an assault always gives the advantage to the defender. Memnon fully expected to destroy Alexander's forces as they tried to cross the river and climb its steep banks. However, Alexander audaciously charged the Persian cavalry at its strongest point and by sheer force of man and mount brutally put them to flight. The Persian horsemen retreated under the force of this thrust, and escaped. With nothing to stop them, Alexander's cavalry crashed heavily into Darius' Greek infantrymen, who unlike their Persian counterparts, stood their ground and courageously fought until most were massacred. Only after the few survivors realized that they had no chance against Alexander's capable cavalry, did they finally surrender. News of Alexander's victory soon reached the Greek cities of Darius' empire in Asia Minor. Although they had previously refused submission to Philip's expeditionary force, most decided to open their gates and admit Alexander.¹⁵

There is an important lesson in all of this, which may be applied to the Arab invasion of Iran almost one thousand years later. The main defenses of the ancient world's most powerful empires—Persian, Chinese or





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Roman—were concentrated along their peripheries; once these peripheral defenses were penetrated, there was no organized system of fortifications or strategies to stop the invaders. Alexander's campaigns against the centralized Achaemenid state pointed this up—inexorably and tragically. Once he penetrated the peripheral defenses, his thrusts drove unmolested to the empire's heart. Of some twenty sieges that he conducted between 335 and 325 B.C., none were within the confines of the empire because, "as befitted a great state, [Persia's] interior was defended at its periphery."¹⁶

From a Persian standpoint, the calamity at Granicus set in motion a chain of unmitigated disasters. Planning to stop Alexander's progress, Darius personally led an even larger army against him, and took up position at the banks of the river Pinarus,¹⁷ which flows near the city of Iskenderun in modern Turkey. The great battle these two kings fought there is known as the battle of Issus (333 B.C.). Learning nothing from their previous defeat, the Persians positioned themselves at the banks of the river, expecting to have the advantage of an entrenched defending force against an exposed river crossing under fire. Once again, Alexander—who personally led his men on foot—charged headlong into the Persian ranks, which collapsed under the force of his onslaught. Defeat was so sudden, and so total, that although Darius escaped unharmed, his wives, mother, and children were captured by the Macedonians.¹⁸

Reinforced by fresh Macedonian recruits, Alexander marched against Darius once more. The two armies converged at a place called Gaugamela, to the east of the city of Mosul in present day Iraq. In spite of the numerical superiority of the Persians, Alexander managed to utterly defeat them and irrevocably destroy their army (331 B.C.). This was the end for the Persian king, who escaped to Media. Meanwhile Bisthanes, a son of the previous Persian emperor, Artaxerxes Ochus (425-338 B.C.) surrendered to Alexander and informed him that Darius had taken most of the remaining royal treasury and had escaped, accompanied by 3,000 cavalry and 6,000 of his Greek infantrymen.¹⁹

Darius led his remaining force along the royal road through Rhagae or Rey, near old Tehran—toward the eastern provinces of his empire. He evidently hoped to either defend the remaining half of his realm, or to sue for peace. Alexander spent several days in hot pursuit, and





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then learned that the Persian nobles accompanying Darius had put him under arrest. He closed the distance with his prey near the city of Shāhrud, but before he could reach his quarry, two Iranian nobles, Nabarzanes and Barsaentes, stabbed Darius and escaped into the desert. When Alexander reached the king's wagon, only a bloodied corpse remained from the king of kings. This national tragedy was good luck for Alexander; a living Darius could have been an inconvenience or an embarrassment. But a dead Darius, especially one that had previously offered Alexander the western part of his empire, along with his daughter's hand in marriage, could be useful. Let me explain this further, because a romantic version of Darius' offer has even entered the *Shāhnāme* narrative (v:558: 371-372).

Shortly before the battle of Gaugamela, a diplomatic message from Darius offered Alexander the following: all the territories of the Persian empire west of the Euphrates, 30,000 talents of gold as ransom for the queen mother and Darius' wife and children, a treaty of friendship between Persia and Macedonia, and the king's daughter Stateira as wife.²⁰ The generous nature of the offer led Alexander's veteran general, Parmenio to remark that if he were Alexander he would accept this offer. But Alexander famously retorted, "So would I, if I were Parmenio".²¹ The point is that Darius' offer, recorded as it was in the *Royal Records* of the Achaemenid court,²² had already legitimized Alexander as the ruler of the western half of the empire, and as the potential son-in-law of the king of kings. With Darius dead, Alexander's legitimacy was automatically extended from the western half to the whole of the Achaemenid Empire. In order to impress this fact upon friend and foe, the young Macedonian king used a series of clever moves to set himself up as Darius' avenger, as well as the protector of the Persian royal family.

Alexander had already taken to addressing Darius' mother, Sisymbria as "mother." He had also told the royals that he would provide fitting dowries for Darius' daughters when the time came for them to marry. Moreover, when Darius' wife died from complications of childbirth while in Macedonian care, he had arranged a royal funeral for her in the Persian manner. In fact, Alexander had treated the entire royal family, including Darius' eight-year-old son with great respect, and had kept them





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in their royal residence in Susa.²³ So he had already taken over Darius' role as the head of the royal household.²⁴ As Darius' legitimate successor, Alexander pursued and severely punished the king's murderers, and sent Darius' body to Persepolis for burial in a royal tomb. He also appointed Darius' brother, Oxyathres to serve as one of his close associates, which further stressed his association with the royal family.²⁵ By these acts of inclusion and kindness, Alexander had established himself as the lawful successor of Darius.²⁶

There were several other policies that the young Macedonian king pursued in order to transform himself into the recognized king of the whole Persian Empire. He took to wearing some articles of Persian attire while insisting that all his subjects observe customs that were typical of Persian courts.²⁷ Alexander's Persian dress is interpreted as an attempt to conciliate his new subjects while putting Macedonians on notice that he no longer had to exclusively depend on them. But Plutarch (46-120 A.D.) reads it differently. To him, Alexander's Persian dress was a symbolic expression of his wish to bring about a political fusion between the Asiatic and the European components of his empire. Another Roman historian, Arrian (ca. 86-146 A.D.) suggests an alternative interpretation: that the change in Alexander's dress signaled his adoption of "barbarian immoderation," which was also expressed in his insatiable appetite for conquest.²⁸ Whatever the real reasons, the fact that Alexander transformed his appearance in accordance with the tastes of his new subjects is beyond doubt.

At about the same time when Alexander took to wearing Persian clothes, he also began to increase the number of Iranians in his forces. After the year 330 B.C., the king's army—which had been almost exclusively Greek and Macedonian—saw its Hellenic component begin to decrease compared with its Iranian element. An interesting aspect of this shift may be seen in the fact that when Alexander departed Bactria in 327 B.C., he ordered that 30,000 Iranian youths be recruited and trained in Macedonian military techniques. Bosworth writes:

The change in the army reflected Alexander's own transition from king of Macedon to king of Asia. His Macedonians were in his eyes no longer a privileged élite but subjects on much the same level as the Iranians. He had





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served notice at Opis that, if necessary, he would man his army and officer corps from Persians, and his new army was a constant reminder of the fact.²⁹

In a related vein, Alexander kept many of the Persian officials who had submitted to his rule in their old posts. This policy not only lessened the chances of Persian resistance, but also ensured administrative and bureaucratic continuity. For instance, according to Arrian and Curtius Rufus (d. 53 A.D.), Alexander kept Satibarzanes, the satrap of Susia (probably the city of Tus near Mashhad) in his post³⁰ and he also reinstated Atropates, satrap of Media, and Phrataphernes, satrap of Parthia and Hyrcania.³¹

A quick digression to clarify an important point: Iranians often confuse Greeks and Macedonians, and lose sight of the fact that Alexander was Macedonian—not Greek. Most modern readers of ancient history are unaware of the bitter rivalry between the Macedonian and the Greek elements of Alexander's army, and also of the fact that a significant part of the Achaemenid infantrymen who fiercely fought against Alexander's army were Greek mercenaries. Being a Macedonian himself, Alexander did not particularly trust his Greek allies, who would have considered him to be a provincial yokel. It has been convincingly argued that Alexander trusted only two Greeks in his service. One historian attributes the "fierceness of the struggle between the Greek mercenaries of Darius and Alexander's Macedonians" to the existence of racial tension between the two groups. This circumstance must have contributed to the gradual increase in the Iranian elements of Alexander's empire: he trusted Persians more than Greeks.

Persianization of Alexander's military forces and personal entourage, which had begun with the build up of Persian forces in his army, continued after his death. A complementary process of Hellenization within Persian society was also afoot. Whenever two great cultures come in close contact—especially in the way that Persian and Hellenic cultures collided during and after the Macedonian invasion of Iran—they are bound to influence each other. Most historians concentrate on the deeds of "great men" in this exchange, and attribute profound cultural influences to certain architects who tend to be men of action. In my opinion these scholars neglect the profound influence of women in such processes. Because





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the pattern of female influence in cultural transformation is one that we find again during the Arab conquest of Iran, I would like to explain it further.

III. An Excursus on Love and War:

Although wars are bloody and brutal affairs, our habit of exalting their heroic aspects glosses over the anguish of their victims and neglects the details of their horror. We tend to concentrate on the technical, phallic potency that weapons of war generate rather than the bloody havoc they wreak. This compartmentalization diverts our gaze from the unspeakable gore that these weapons generate to their veneer of technology and glory. The military historian, John Keegan, makes the point quite strikingly in one of his books:

I constantly recall the look of disgust that passed over the face of a highly distinguished curator of one of the greatest collections of arms and armor in the world when I casually remarked to him that a common type of debris removed from the flesh of wounded men by surgeons in the gunpowder age was broken bone and teeth from neighbors in the ranks. He had simply never considered what was the effect of the weapons about which he knew so much, as artifacts, on the bodies of the soldiers who used them.³²

More recently, a scene in Ridley Scott's film, *Body of Lies*, showed a doctor picking fragments of bones from the flesh of a character played by Leonardo DiCaprio, and telling him not to worry, they were fragments of someone else's bones who was close to him during an explosion. Western news media's decision not to show the mangled bodies strewn about in the "collateral damage" produced by the West's "war on terror" manages to conceal war's horror by reducing it to a PG-Rated video game. But the casualty count—the young teen-aged and twenty-something soldiers and the civilians—keeps growing.

Ancient warfare, like its modern variety, had two classes of victims: those who fell in the fight, and the noncombatants who survived it. These surviving victims, usually women, children, and the infirm, were the most vulnerable; their suffering most often began after the cessation of fighting. Among these, women, although marginalized in scholarship on war,





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suffered most because they lived to mourn their fathers, brothers, and sons, and to endure the indignities of enslavement. But their suffering is often depicted quite unrealistically. Frank Holt, a Professor of History at the University of Houston, points to the representation of some captive Persian women in an advertising poster for the 1955 Robert Rossen film, *Alexander the Great*.³³ This poster shows large masses of armored soldiers clashing while the Persepolis palace burns in the background, and a number of attractive and barely clothed women are happily manhandled and subjugated:

Three are being carried off, slung over a warrior's shoulder or hoisted around the waist. ... All three of these captives appear absolutely delighted by the event, their faces brightened by the rapture. The fourth woman does not smile, but rather lies on the ground, gazing upward at Alexander, completely starstruck ... Billing the film as "THE MOST COLOSSAL MOTION PICTURE OF ALL TIME!" the advertisers give the horrors of war and pillage the ridiculous semblance of spring break among the wild and willing (Holt, p.88).



Advertising poster for Rossen's 1955 film, *Alexander the Great*





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Captured women, whose violation is routinely depicted with indifference, often wound up exerting quite a disproportional influence upon post-conflict events. These women frequently ended up as wives or concubines of the victors. They mothered the first generation of their native lands' new rulers. Biology is not destiny, but because of biology these women were destined to influence historical events. This was especially true when the aristocracy of the invading army consciously decided to intermarry with the aristocracy of the defeated population, as Alexander and his soldiers did.

The children of these unions were bicultural, and often bilingual, because they were raised in their mothers' own language, and absorbed the customs, tales, and values of their mothers' native culture—the culture of the vanquished. Later, when the boys grew up and joined their fathers in the ruling class, they acquired a second layer of cultural values. This psychologically less potent second enculturation was weaker than the one they were nurtured on with their mothers' milk. In time, these children, these creatures of the two warring worlds, became the conduit of cultural and linguistic exchange and the architects of a new order. Broadly speaking, such a sequence of events is found in almost every ancient invasion where the attackers interacted with native women. Consider how William H. McNeill, a University of Chicago historian, describes the aftermath of the Viking incursions into Europe:

By A.D. 900, the Viking raids, which had been so destructive to Irish, English, and Frankish societies, were changing character. Instead of returning to the chill twilight of the Scandinavian north, Viking crews began to spend the winter in softer more southerly climes... Resulting liaisons with local women soon called into existence a new generation of formidable warriors who more often than not spoke the language of their mothers—Flemish, French, Russian, English, or Galic, as the case might be.³⁴

The cultural implications of the interaction between conquering armies and women of the defeated side are more far-reaching than what we, in our androcentric habits of mind, are willing to imagine. Perhaps the movie poster's illustrator, who depicted smiling Persian women being hauled off into captivity, was unconsciously aware of their later influ-





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ence. There is, of course, nothing funny about the ravaging of defenseless women. However, on a purely semiotic level of analysis perhaps the smile on the lips of the women in this poster symbolizes the eventuality that these victims will have the last laugh; that upon the graves of their fallen men they will nurture their half-breed sons to replace the defeated and the dead as the rulers of their land. The Macedonian and the Arab conquests of Iran led to the creation of such a hybrid generation of rulers, who played a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of Iranian culture in its *postbellum* phase.

The above scenario serves as a synopsis of what transpired when Alexander approached the Persian capital. Following the Macedonian victory at Gaugamela, Tiridates, the citadel commander of Persepolis, wrote to Alexander and surrendered. The king rode into the city and encamped himself at the Royal palace. Then, although the city had surrendered, he turned the rest of the metropolis over to his troops, who ravaged it. The homes of the aristocracy were mercilessly sacked; all the men were put to the sword, while the women and children were enslaved during what has been called “an act of outrage on a helpless populace.”³⁵

Following this bloody interlude, Alexander focused on creating good relations between Macedonians and the remnants of the Persian nobility. When he left Susa in the latter part of 331 B.C., he ordered that the surviving Persian princesses be taught Greek so that they could be married off to Macedonian husbands.³⁶ In Sogdiana (present day Afghanistan) he married Roxane, the daughter of a local Iranian aristocrat, and upon returning to Iran persuaded ninety-one of his generals to take aristocratic Persian ladies as wives in a lavish ceremony.³⁷ As one historian of the period puts it, the marriage between Alexander’s men and Persian women effectively changed the make-up of the ruling class in Alexander’s empire.³⁸

Alexander himself married two Persian princesses: Darius’ daughter, Stateira, and Parysatis, a daughter of Artaxerxes III. One of his friends and generals married a sister of Alexander’s own royal wife because Alexander wanted their children to be cousins.³⁹ After Alexander’s death, however, all but one of the Macedonians divorced their Persian wives. Only Seleucus, who married Apamae, a daughter of the Bactrian nobleman, Spitamenes, kept his Iranian wife, and he was the only one of Al-





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alexander's generals who managed to succeed Alexander in Iran. Later, he went on to establish the Seleucid dynasty.⁴⁰ Frye attributes the relative stability of Seleucus' rule in the east to the abilities of his son, Antiochus, whose mother was Apamae⁴¹, but I believe it is unwise to marginalize Apamae herself. More on this later.

Let me leave this section by pointing out to my Iranian readers that the Achaemenid Empire that fell to Alexander's assault was equally victimized by the incompetence of its ruler and the treachery of its nobility, who assassinated their king while he was fighting off foreign invaders. We encounter the Persian nobility's regicidal tendencies once again during the Arab conquest of Iran, when the emperor, Yazdgerd falls victim to it. It is now time to briefly consider Alexander's depiction in the *Shāhnāme* and explain the generally positive depiction of this most maligned foreign invader in Iran's national poem.

IV. Alexander in Iranian Epics:

There may be no doubt that Alexander has entered Iran's national epic tradition as one of the "good guys." *Shāhnāme* devotes 2408 distichs (4816 lines) of poetry to his life and adventures in Khaleghi-Motlagh's edition. To help put this fact in context, let me point out that the story of the founder of the Sassanid dynasty, Ardashir I (224-240 A.D.), is told in 1435 distichs (*beyt*), that of Shāpur-e Zolaktāf (i. e., Shāpur II 309-379 A.D.) in 660 distichs, and the stories of Jamshid, Zahhāk, Fereydun, and Manuchehr in 194, 499, 1068, and 1608 distichs respectively. Therefore, at least quantitatively, the tale of the foreign Alexander is told in greater detail and with more liveliness than those of many native Iranian kings. Several Persian romances have also preserved versions of Alexander's story. Two of the most famous are the poems by Nezāmi (1135-1217 A.D.) in 10500 distichs, and a long prose version that is inspired by the account of pseudo-Callisthenes; it runs to over 700 pages of small print.⁴²

Stories about Alexander have found their way into Iran's folk-literature as well. This important fact implies that Alexander gained heroic status in Persian folk tradition, and that the general public admired him as one of their heroic kings. One of the most prominent





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professional story-tellers (*naqqāl*) of 20th century Iran, Mr. Abbās Zariri, gave a good indication of Alexander's popularity to Professor Jalil Doostkhah:

In 1929 (1308 shamsi) the stories of the *Shāhnāme* were not commonly narrated, except for the Rostamnāme, which was a small book that contained a brief account of what transpired between the birth of Rostam and the death of Afrāsiyāb, and even that was not particularly popular. Professional storytellers usually narrated stories of Alexander, Amīr Arsalān, etc.⁴³

I can vouch for this because in the 1950's, when I was still a child, different nannies and servants in Tehran, Esfahan, Ābādeh, and Abarqu told me stories in which Alexander was depicted as a "good guy." Clearly, tales of Alexander were considered legitimate parts of Persian epic tradition in its popular oral forms, as well as in scholarly literary forms. This means the Macedonian was accepted by the Iranian public opinion as a bona fide Iranian hero. But before going further into this, let's see how Alexander is portrayed in the *Shāhnāme*, and how Persian scholars interpret his depiction in the epic.

According to the *Shāhnāme*, the Iranian king Dārāb attacks Greece; unable to defend his country against such a powerful enemy, the Grecian king Philip, makes a peace offer that includes the marriage of his daughter, Nāhid with Dārāb. Nāhid, is sent to Iran and marries the king. However, revolted by her unpleasant odor, the king sends her back to her father. Once back in Greece, Nāhid realizes that she is carrying the Persian king's child, and gives birth to Alexander at her father's court. But since her pregnancy was kept secret, Philip claims that the new-born Alexander is his son by one of his own wives. Therefore, according to the *Shāhnāme*, Alexander is the son of the Iranian king, and a legitimate prince of the realm.

Dārāb is succeeded by his son, Dārā—whose name is one letter short of his father's, and as far as intelligence is concerned, is also one brick shy of a load. Dārā is an arrogant and obstinate ruler who abandons his father's wise ways. The *Shāhnāme* depicts him as the opposite of his wiser and older brother, Alexander. Thus, Alexander's victory over Dārā and his conquest of Iran is turned into an Iranian dynastic struggle rather than





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the tale of a foreign invasion (v: 518-561).

The *Shāhnāme* episode of Alexander has been interpreted as a “face-saving” or patriotic narrative maneuver aimed at lessening the dishonor of defeat by an alien incursion. Professor Mojtaba Minovi’s interpretation is typical:

The story of Alexander ... is adopted from foreign sources except for in one of its features. In order to lessen the shame of defeat, Iranians have [concocted] the story of the Persian king’s marriage with the daughter of the king of Greece, and of sending her back after sleeping with her once. This girl gave birth to a son, whom the Greek king claimed as his own, and named Alexander. In fact, Alexander was the brother of the last Dārā, and Dārā was defeated by his own brother.⁴⁴

The theory that Iranians may have concocted this story in order to soften the blow of foreign conquest is plausible. However, plausibility is not the same thing as proof. A similar story, in which Alexander’s father is the Egyptian king Nectanebo II (360-343 B.C.) exists in the Egyptian versions of his tale.⁴⁵ Since these similar tales existed among two peoples whom Alexander vanquished and then sought to conciliate, it could be argued, with equal plausibility, that these stories may have been concocted by Alexander’s own propagandists. Alternatively, these tales may have been fabricated by the Greco-Persian and Greco-Egyptian nobilities of these post-conquest societies, who wanted to bridge the gap between the worlds of their fathers with that of their mothers.⁴⁶ All of these scenarios, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, are plausible and may have been at work.

Another manifestation of Alexander’s attempt at co-opting the Persian nobility is expressed in the story of his marriage to Roshanak, Dārā’s daughter in the *Shāhnāme*. The details of Alexander’s marriage to Roshanak, her being with child at the time of Alexander’s death, and her eulogy for her royal spouse are set forth in the poem (v:558:370-372; and vi: 4:23-26; 5:31-41; 8-10; 120:1777-1780; 127-128:1886-1894). This is an imaginative confluence of two historical events which we have mentioned before: Alexander’s marriages to two Persian princesses, and his marriage with an aristocratic lady in Eastern Iran.

The *Shāhnāme*’s account of Alexander’s marriage to Dārā’s daughter





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is only half-true. Alexander did marry two Persian princesses; however, neither one of them was called Roshanak. One was Stateira, and the other Parysatis.⁴⁷ The Greek form of the name Roshanak is Roxane, who as we have already seen, was the famous and beautiful Sogdian princess whom Alexander married in the spring of 327 during his eastern campaigns.⁴⁸ Roxane's father, the nobleman Oxyartes, was one of the aristocrats of eastern Iran during Darius' reign.⁴⁹

Following Alexander's death, the pregnant Roxane conspired with the Macedonian general Perdiccas to kill her husband's other wives. She had the princesses Stateira and Parysatis killed in order to secure the throne for her own son.⁵⁰ She gave birth to a son who was given the dynastic name of Alexander IV, and jointly ruled the empire with Alexander's invalid half-brother, Philip Arrhidaeus under the protection of the general, Perdiccas with the support of Alexander's mother, Olympias. Olympias executed Philip Arrhidaeus in 317 B.C.; and two years later she was killed herself. Finally, Macedonian nobles, who were uneasy about being ruled by a half-breed, put Roxane and her teenage son to death in 311 B.C.⁵¹ This sordid dynastic mess is a far cry from what transpires in the *Shāhnāmeḥ* concerning Alexander and Roshanak.

Whether the *Shāhnāmeḥ* version of Alexander's saga was invented by Iranians to save face, or by the king's propagandists in order to legitimize his invasion is unimportant. Alexander must have had a hand in it all because we know that he had taken to addressing Darius' mother, Sisygambis as "mother," had taken Darius' brother into his confidence, and had set himself up as both the protector of the royal family and the avenger of the king's murder. Moreover, Alexander's generally decent treatment of his Persian subjects and his adoption of Persian customs and dress must have gradually increased his popularity in Iran, especially because he had grown fond of using these Persian subjects to keep his Macedonian forces in line. Alexander is reported to have boasted that the "Persians in his entourage followed him out of free choice".⁵² This is no idle claim. There is a *Shāhnāmeḥ* scene in which Alexander scolds the Greeks who were unwilling to follow him in his unending march for conquest. He threatens that after conquering the east, he will return to attack Greece at the head of his Persian army (vi:40 – 41:517-523):





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برآشفت و بشکست بازارشان	سکندر غمی شد ز گفتارشان
ز رومی، کسی را نیامد زیان	چنین گفت کز جنگ ایرانیان
کسی از شما باد جسته ندید	به دارا براز بندگان بدرسید
دل ازدها را به پی بسپرم	برین راه من بی شما بگذرم
نپردازد از بئن به رزم و به سور	ببیند از آن پس که دیجورفور
به مردی به زیر آورم روی بوم	چو زو باز گردم بیایم به روم
نخواهم که رومی بودنیک خواه	مرا یار بزدان و ایران سپاه

Their words angered Sikandar,
And in wrath, he frustrated their scheme.
He said, "In war with Iranians
Not a single Greek suffered harm.
Ill came upon Dārā from his own slaves;
None of you was injured in the least.
I will proceed without you upon this path
And will trample upon the dragon's heart
You will see that [king] Fur of dark continence
Will no longer be able to take to feasting
And when I finish with him, I will proceed to Greece
And by my manliness I will subjugate that whole land
Having God and the Iranian host by my side,
I need no help from the Greeks.

It is important to keep in mind that the picture of Alexander in Persian literary and folk traditions is not that of the military and cultural destroyer of the land that was consciously promoted by the Pahlavi regime and parroted by nationalist academics. Persians had already assimilated Alexander as much as he wanted to be assimilated in his lifetime, and had transformed him into a bona fide Iranian prince. I think the half-Persian, half-Macedonian children who were borne from the union of invading warriors and native women had a role to play in adapting the foreign king into Iranian epic tradition as a hero, and in the Iranization of his successors. Now, let's go back to our review of Iran's history.





V. Seleucids and the Hullabaloo about Hellenization:

Alexander's death in 323 B.C., was followed by fierce fighting over succession among his generals. The most powerful contenders were: Perdiccas (d. 321 B.C.), who conspired with Roxane and killed the Persian princesses whom Alexander had married, Ptolemy (367-283 B.C.) the founder of the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt, Antigonus (382-301 B.C.), and Seleucus (r. 305-281 B.C.). There were other pretenders, such as Peucestas, the Macedonian satrap of Persis (present day Fārs) who had taken to wearing Persian clothes and had also learned the language. Pithon, satrap of Media, made a less consequential attempt at kingship. The man who emerged as the victor in the eastern parts of Alexander's empire was Seleucus, who established himself as king in 305/304 B.C., shortly after killing his powerful rival Antigonus in the battle of Ipsus in 301 B.C.. Seleucus gradually extended his rule over Syria and Anatolia as well as other eastern territories. He ruled as Alexander's successor for almost a quarter of century until his assassination in September of 281 B.C.⁵³

The major factor in allowing Seleucus to focus his energies on defeating his western rivals was, I believe, his Iranian wife, who helped him gain firm control over the eastern parts of his empire. Let me explain this. As I pointed out before, Seleucus was the only one of Alexander's generals who remained married to his Iranian wife after the king's death. Seleucus' wife, Apama, was the daughter of the Sogdian aristocrat, Spitamenes (370-328 B.C.), who had fought Alexander's forces in a long and protracted guerilla war until he was killed by traitors in his camp. Seleucus was therefore related to the eastern Iranian aristocracy by marriage, and his eastern relatives must have helped him gain a firm control in the east. Holt realizes this and points out that Apama served the same political function for Seleucus in the east as Alexander's Sogdian wife Roxane had previously served for her husband. Seleucus must have also taken the policy of "make love not war," to heart because he managed to reach accommodations with the Mauryan ruler of India, Chandragupta, by means of another diplomatic marriage.⁵⁴

Apama bore Seleucus a son named Antiochus, who was eventually appointed co-regent of the empire and satrap of all provinces east of the Euphrates. Antiochus served in that dual capacity from 292 to 281 B.C..





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This boy, who later succeeded his father as Antiochus I, is a prime example of the bicultural and bilingual generation of princes born of Iranian mothers and Macedonian fathers.

To the extent that history is an androcentric enterprise, it tends to marginalize women and underestimate their influence. It is not a feminist revision of history to point out that the past was not peopled only by men and that history cannot be only a narrative of male activity. We can't let laziness or traditional habits of mind cause us to disregard the role that the other half of humanity played in shaping our past. It is not wrong to argue that the final consolidation of Seleucus' power in the east was managed by his son, Antiochus. What *is* wrong is the assumption that Apama had no role in this process. For instance, Frye credits Antiochus with securing Selucid rule over eastern parts of the empire,⁵⁵ and Holt praises his efficiency, skill and competence.⁵⁶ However, Antiochus did not burst out of his father's head like Athena. He was not only Seleucus' son and the warrior Spitamenes' grandson, but also the son of his mother Apama, who must have influenced him at least as greatly as did his dead grandfather, whom he never met. This is an example of women's marginalization in historiography that we have seen before.

None of us necessarily marginalize women consciously. We do it habitually because that's the way we have always done history. The standard accounts of Seleucus' success in Iran push Apama aside and place Antiochus at the center. But as we all know, men are as much sons of their mothers as they are of their fathers. And quite often the mothers' influence during one's formative years is unrivaled.

An interesting detail in Antiochus' life reveals an unusually high level of emotional dependence on his mother. Antiochus fell in love with his father's other wife, Stratonice, and pined for her so desperately that Seleucus feared for his love-sick son's life and allowed Stratonice to marry the young man. The blatant nature of Antiochus' "mother-fixation" should be obvious to even the most ardent anti-Freudian. An Oedipal attachment to his mother Apama must have been displaced unto his step-mother, Stratonice, who bore him several children, one of whom he named Apama. Thus, Antiochus surrounded himself by women who reminded him of his mother.





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Apama's influence upon her husband and her son is revealed in another detail. Both Seleucus and Antiochus named several cities after Apama. One of the most notable of these, a city called Apamaea, was the principal arsenal of the Seleucid Empire. All of this indicates that Apama was an impressive woman, and that Antiochus could not have escaped the influence of such a powerful personality on his life and deeds. Therefore, Seleucus' remarkable success in consolidating his rule over Alexander's eastern empire, must at least partly be credited to his Iranian wife, and to the connections that the marriage had allowed him to forge with the aristocracy of eastern Iran. Moreover, thanks to his Iranian relatives in Sogdiana, Seleucus was able to keep order in the eastern provinces and concentrate on expanding his empire westward. Of course, we must keep in mind that the connection of Sogdian and Bactrian territories to any central power—be it that of the Achaemenids, Seleucids, Sassanids or more recently, Russians and Americans—has always been tenuous.⁵⁷ But tenuous or not, Seleucus managed to maintain control largely thanks to his wife and his half-Iranian son.

We went through this long discussion of Alexander's invasion for several reasons. First, to dispel a number of false beliefs about Alexander that are prevalent among Iranians. For instance, it is not true that the Macedonian ruler conquered Iran, killed the king, and caused great damage and misery to the country. His invasion of the country was quick, and compared to other foreign attacks, relatively painless. However, the propaganda machinery of the Sassanid dynasty did a fine job of maligning him beyond redemption. Most of our myths about Alexander are influenced by that propaganda. Second, in spite of the military defeat that Iranians suffered, the administrative continuity of the Achaemenid bureaucracy was largely maintained because of Alexander's reappointment of many Achaemenid satraps to their former posts. Third, the pillaging of some Persian cities by Macedonians was not as devastating as many Iranians imagine. In the larger context of Alexander's attacks and the undeniable devastation that results from such military activities, the whole event was less destructive than it is made out to be. Even the burning of the Persepolis, which must have been psychologically quite traumatizing because of its symbolism, did not mark





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the end of the empire's political culture. Such destruction is expected in ancient warfare, which although less widespread and thorough in its barbarity than the modern variety, was quite a savage business. Fourth, the disruption in Iran's cultural life as a result of Alexander's invasion was minimal. The country continued with her language, religion, and customs intact, and if anything, exerted a considerable influence upon her invaders.

Western scholarship is fond of stressing the so-called "Hellenization" of Iranians on the basis of archeological and historical reports. I have no arguments with the fact of "Hellenization" nor do I question the existence of the evidence in its favor. What I object to is the extent of its exaggeration in Western scholarship on Iran. For reasons that do not directly concern us here, I believe that Iranians "gave as good as they got." The cultural relationship between Iran and her invaders was one of give and take, rather than straight "Hellenization" of Iranians. This point was made some time ago by Samuel K. Eddy, and more recently by Bijan Gheiby.⁵⁸ Persia was a great empire—not some backward and impressionable European forest community that could be culturally overcome by a band of Macedonians. Furthermore, stripped of the halo placed around it by Eurocentric scholarship, Macedonia was an outlying province, not exactly the cultural hub of the Hellenic world. This "Hellenization" business is more a product of an overactive European imagination than anything else. Classicists seem to be better aware of this fact than their Orientalist colleagues. The article on "Hellenization" in *Brill's New Pauly* puts the matter quite clearly:

Special cases of Hellenization were those societies in which the indigenous cultural patterns determined to a large extent what would be taken from Greek cultural skills as usable for their own purposes, or without risk to their own identity including Rome, the Jews, Parthian-Sassanid Iran, and Carthage, where despite extensive Hellenization processes the native identity could survive in an unbroken line of tradition, altered certainly but also strengthened.⁵⁹

Of course, even this assessment has a strong Eurocentric odor. For instance, Rome that lost *all* of her mythology to Greece, can hardly be





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compared with Iran, which *kept* all of hers. But scholarship, like history, is written by the victors. Let's leave it at that for now, and return to the narrative of Persia's cultural history from the rule of the Parthians (247 B.C.-224 A.D.) through the Muslim invasion of the 7th century—our next chapter.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See for example: <http://www.cappuccinomag.com/iranology/001140.html>, also <http://www.derafsh-kaviyani.com/books/rezai.pdf>, and http://www.ariarman.com/Iranian_Library/Derafsh_kaviani.pdf
- 2 For more conventional print sources see:
مثلاً نگاه کنید به عبدالعظیم رضائی/زین العابدین آذرخش (ویراستاران). تاریخ ده هزارساله ایران. ۴ مجلد (تهران: اقبال، ۱۳۸۰). این کتاب به چاپ سیزدهم رسیده است.
- 3 Richard N. Frye suggests "about 900 BC" in his *Iran*. 2nd edition (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1960), p.33; cf. also Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (Cleveland / NY: The World Publishing Co., 1963), p.65.
- 4 I. M. Diakonoff. "Media," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol.2, edited by Ilya Gershevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.148.
- 5 The estimate is Wheeler's, who also estimates the empire's population at about 50,000,000 souls. See Benjamin Ide Wheeler's *Alexander the Great, The Merging of East and West in Universal History* (New York / London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), p.199.
- 6 I have followed the account provided by one of Britain's prominent military historians, John Keegan. See Keegan, John. *The Masks of Command* (NY: Viking, 1987), pp. 23-91. loc. cit, pp.23-91. However, there is no shortage of more recent studies on Alexander's exploits. The interested reader may find ample material in the texts and bibliographies of what is still considered a classic in the field, J. F. C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Alexander the Great* (New York: DaCapo Press, 2004), originally published in 1960; A. B. Bosworth, *Alexander and the East: The Tragedy of Triumph* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); James R. Ashley, *The Macedonian Empire: The Era of Warfare Under Philip II and Alexander the Great* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 1998); David J. Lonsdale, *Alexander the Great: Lessons in Strategy* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
- 7 A. B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire: The Reign of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.5-17.
- 8 Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, pp.17-18.
- 9 Bosworth, p.17.
- 10 Loc. cit, pp.18-19; and see also, John Keegan, *The Masks of Command* (NY: Viking, 1987), p.23. Keegan's brief and illuminating discussion of Alexander's campaigns in this book is among one of the best studies of Alexander's military genius.
- 11 Ulrich Wilcken, *Alexander the Great*, translated by G. C. Richards (New York: Norton, 1967), pp.76-77; cf. J. R. Hamilton, *Alexander the Great* (London; Hutchinson, 1973), p.56.





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- 12 Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Knopf, 1994), p.64.
- 13 Keegan, *Masks*, p.27.
- 14 Wilcken, pp.77-78; Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, pp.33-34; J. R. Hamilton, *Alexander the Great*, pp50-51. However, Keegan estimates his forces at 40,000 infantry and 5000 cavalry, loc. cit., p.24.
- 15 For instance, see Hamilton, *Alexander*, pp.58-60; Wilcken, *Alexander*, pp.90-92.
- 16 John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, p.145.
- 17 Hamilton, *Alexander*, p.66 and cf. Keegan, *Masks*, p.24. Bosworth writes: "... The total figures for his [Darius] army are shamelessly magnified for the greater glory of Alexander, and it is impossible to give even an educated guess at the reality." *Conquest and Empire*, p.57.
- 18 Hamilton, *Alexander*, p.69; Hammond, *Alexander*, pp.111-112.
- 19 Hammond, pp.168-169; Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, p.85.
- 20 Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, pp.75-76, and see his references in note 158 of that page; Hammond, *Alexander*, p.120; Wilcken, p.111.
- 21 Hamilton, *Alexander*, p.73.
- 22 Cf. Hammond, *Alexander*, p.112, where he refers to these records as *King's Journal*.
- 23 Hammond, *Alexander*, p.170.
- 24 Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, pp.63-64.
- 25 Hamilton, *Alexander*, p.91; Hammond, *Alexander*, p.170.
- 26 Hamilton, *Alexander*, p.85; Hammond, *Alexander*, p.168.
- 27 Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, p.158; cf. Hans Werner Ritter, *Diadem und Königsherrschaft* (München: Beck, 1965), pp.31 ff.; Albert B. Bosworth, "Alexander and the Iranians," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*. Vol.100, 1980, pp.5-8.
- 28 Albert B. Bosworth, *From Arrian to Alexander, Studies in Historical Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 147-148. For other discussions of Alexander's conscious desire to fuse the Persian and the European cultures of his subjects see also: Wheeler, *Alexander*, who writes that Alexander had adopted "Oriental manners" to the point of becoming a "half Oriental" in the eyes of his own men (p.270), and adds that his older men felt that he was no longer the man who left Europe with them (pp.388-389); Hamilton, *Alexander*, pp.133-134; Andrew Stewart, *Faces of Power: Alexander's Image and Hellenistic Politics* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1993), pp.91-92; Peter M. Fraser, *Cities of Alexander the Great* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp.180-182; Frank L. Holt, *Into the Land of Bones: Alexander the Great in Afghanistan* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2005), pp.114-115.
- 29 Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, p.273; cf. also pp.271-272, and Bosworth, *From Arrian to Alexander*, pp.140-141; Hamilton, *Alexander*, pp.135; N. G. L. Hammond, *The Three Historians of Alexander the Great: The so-called Vulgate Authors, Diodorus, Justin, and Curtius* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), p.72; Holt, *Into the Land of Bones*, p.114.
- 30 Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, p.99; Hamilton, *Alexander*, p.85.
- 31 Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, p.127.
- 32 Keegan, *History of Warfare*, p.90.
- 33 Holt, *Into the Land of Bones*, pp.88-93.
- 34 William H. McNeill, *The Shape of European History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p.80.





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- 35 Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, p.92.
- 36 Loc. cit., p.156.
- 37 Ibid; cf. Hamilton, *Alexander*, p.133-134, where he also mentions that 10,000 Greeks had married Persian women.
- 38 Stoneman, *Alexander*, p.94; cf. Stewart, *Faces of Power*, pp. 92, 181-182.
- 39 Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, pp.156-157; Hamilton, *Alexander*, pp.133-134.
- 40 Stewart, *Faces of Power*, p.317; cf. Hamilton, *Alexander*, p.134.
- 41 Frye *Heritage*, p.131.
- 42 اسکندرنامه (روایت کالیستنس دروغین) به کوشش ایرج افشار (تهران: بنگاه ترجمه و نشر کتاب، ۱۳۴۳). این کتاب اخیراً در تهران با تجدید نظر به چاپ رسیده است (تهران: نشر چشمه، ۱۳۸۷).
- 43 داستان رستم و سهراب، روایت نقالان. نقل و نگارش مرشد عباس زیری، ویرایش جلیل دوستخواه (تهران: توس، ۱۳۶۹)، ص. بیست و هشت. و قس ص ۳۷۷.
- 44 مجتبی مینوی، فردوسی و شعر او (چاپ دوم، تهران: دهخدا، ۱۳۵۴)، ص ۹.
- 45 *The Life of Alexander of Macedon by Pseudo-Callisthenes*, trans. E. A. Haight (New York: Longmans, Green, 1955), pp.1-20.
- 46 ایضاً نگاه کنید به ذبیح الله صفا، حماسه سرائی در ایران (چاپ چهارم، تهران: امیرکبیر، ۱۳۶۳)، ص ۵۴۷.
- 47 Stewart, *Faces of Power*, p.181.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Holt, *Into the Land of Bones*, p.86; Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, p.156; Hamilton, *Alexander*, p.133.
- 50 Holt, *Into the Land of Bones*, pp.115-116.
- 51 Holt, *Into the Land of Bones*, pp.115-119; and Wheeler, *Alexander*, pp.412-413.
- 52 See Bosworth, "Alexander and the Iranians," p. 6.
- 53 Frye, *Heritage of Persia*, pp.128-131.
- 54 Frank L. Holt, *Alexander the Great and Bactria* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), pp.100-101.
- 55 Frye, *Heritage*, p.131.
- 56 Frank L. Holt, *Thundering Zeus: The Making of Hellenistic Bactria* (Berkeley / Los Angeles: UC Press, 1999), p.26.
- 57 This point has been convincingly argued by Holt. See his *Into the Land of Bones*, pp.1-10, 51-52.
- 58 See Samuel K. Eddy, *The King is Dead: Studies in the Near Eastern Resistance to Hellenism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 3-101. See also Bijan Gheiby, *Achievements of our Ancestors and Opinions of the Contemporaries* (Bielefeld, Germany: Nemudar Publications, 2009), pp. 61 ff. This short Persian monograph which was recently published in Germany under the Persian title: آثار نیاکانمان و گفته معاصران challenges much of the assertions of Western scholarship about ancient Iran.
- 59 *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World*, ed. By Hubert Cancik and Helmut Schneider; English edition, managing editor, Christine F. Salazar, assistant editor, David E. Orton (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2002), vol.6, p.97.





Chapter 3



Parthian Power and Sassanid Opulence

چو کوتاه بدشاخ و هم بیخشان نگوید جهان دیده تاریخشان
ازیرا جز از نام نشنیده ام نه در نامه خسروان دیده ام
(شاهنامه فردوسی)

The [Parthians] had no deep roots or lasting branches.
The sages say naught of their history.
Hence have I heard nothing of them except their names,
Nor have I seen but the same in the Book of Kings.
(*The Shāhnāme*)

Parthians, called Ashkāniyān in Persian, and Arsacids by historians, ruled Iran between 247 B.C. and 224 A.D.. Their dominion over the country was longer than the rules of the individual dynasties that preceded and succeeded them—the Achaemenids (559-330 B.C.) and the Sassanids (224-651 A.D.). Despite the long duration of Parthian rule, relatively little is known about them. In fact, most of our textual knowledge of this dynasty comes to us from the Romans, or what survives from Sassanid sources, either in the original or through Persian and Arabic archives. Naturally, neither the Romans nor the Sassanids may be considered “impartial” reporters of their Parthian enemies’ story. Thus, even the little that we do know about these kings is tainted with the biases of their foreign and domestic enemies.¹ In spite



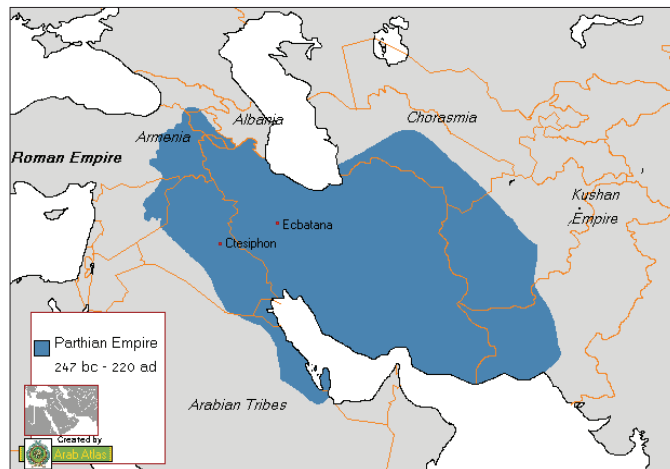


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of this, some things may be inferred about them with a reasonable degree of certainty. It is to these relatively dependable inferences that we shall turn next, in order to consider them in terms of the *Shāhnāme*'s background.

Sometime before the middle of the third century B.C., an Iranian people called the *Dahae*, appeared in an area that stretches from Gorgān in Iran to Khārazm in present day Turkmenistan. These newcomers gave their name to the area, which came to be known as Dahastān, namely “the place of the *Dahae*” after them.² A group of *Dahaeans*, called the *Parni*, branched off from the main population and entered the Iranian plateau where they gradually gained military and political control. These *Dahaeans* elected one of their leaders, a man by the name of Arsaces (Per. Ashk), king in 247 B.C. This event traditionally marks the beginning of the Parthian history, and it is after this first king that the dynasty has been called: Arsacids (Pers. Ashkāniyān).

By around 238 B.C. the *Parni* had already settled in eastern Iran, in the ancient satrapy of *Parthava*, and they gradually expanded their realm until, by the middle of the second century B.C., they commanded a vast territory that stretched westward to Mesopotamia. It is worth remembering that the word *Parthava* has produced the forms, *pahlavi*, and *pahlavān* in New Persian.



The Parthian Empire





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No significant literary documents survive from the Parthian period. This fact feeds into the general bias of the scholarly community, which tends to imagine these people as illiterate. Mainstream Western academics have tagged the *Parni* as either “degenerate Greeks” or “phil-Hellenes under whom Iran experienced its ‘Dark Ages’”; an idea that Frye has justifiably dismissed.³

It seems to me that the Parthians had a PR problem, because almost all our background sources on them have come down to us by way of their foreign and domestic enemies. A Middle Eastern empire with a large and powerful aristocracy, a contiguous territory, and the powerful Roman enemy on its western borders cannot last for 467 years by being illiterate and unsophisticated. A detailed discussion of the Parthian administration and culture would take us too far afield, so I will only discuss two aspects of Parthian history that concern the *Shāhnāmeh*. Let's examine the notion that they were not mentioned in the Persian *Book of Kings*, which as we shall see was the prose precursor of Iran's national epic, and also the assertion that they produced no important body of written literature.

It's absurd to claim that the Parthians were not mentioned in the *Shāhnāmeh's* prose archetype. Iranian epic and historical traditions are detailed enough whenever the stories of the Parthians and the Sassanids intertwine. This is because people enjoy good stories, and in the absence of extremely efficient censorship, good stories—of which the Parthians had plenty—tend to survive. For instance, the story of how the founder of the Sassanid dynasty, Ardashir I (224-240) managed to defeat the last Parthian ruler, Ardavān IV (r. 216-224), which is an entertaining narrative, is as much the story of Ardashir's rise as it is the tale of Ardavān's fall. That's why it has been maintained in the *Shāhnāmeh*. This story is told in 445 distichs (890 lines of poetry), a significant number of verses, especially for a story that is supposedly not there. Indeed, the section of the Parthians' increasingly hostile encounters with Ardashir takes up 781 distichs (1562 lines). Furthermore, the birth stories of Ardashir's son, Shāpur I (r. 240-270) and Shāpur's son, Hormazd I (270-271), both offspring of Parthian princesses, are as much about Parthians as they are about the Sassanids. In spite of these facts, we know that the Parthians





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were intentionally marginalized by the Sassanid authors of the Middle Persian epics, who deleted all but the names of these kings from their narratives.

Let me briefly discuss an important point about how Parthians are mentioned in the *Shāhnāme*; a point that has mislead many students of the poem. Most *Shāhnāme* editions list the verses in which Parthians are mentioned incorrectly. For instance, the text of the Moscow edition reads (vii:116:64-65):

چو کوتاه شد شاخ و هم بیخشان	نگوید جهاندار تاریخشان
کزیشان جز از نام نشنیده‌ام	نه در نامه خسروان دیده‌ام

Since they were cut short root and branch
The lord does not relate their history [pleading]
That "I have not heard but names from them,
Nor have I seen [but names] in the *Book of Kings*.

While the Mohl's edition of the poem reads (v:136:60-61):

چو کوتاه شد شاخ و هم بیخشان	نگوید جهان‌دیده تاریخشان
ازیشان بجز نام نشنیده‌ام	نه در نامه خسروان دیده‌ام

Because they perished root and branch
The sage says nothing of their history
I have heard naught of them but their names
Nor have I seen [anything] in the Book of Kings

These verses are substantially the same except in the second part of the first, and the first part of the second distiches, where the Paris edition is slightly different than the Moscow edition. For reasons that shouldn't detain us here, I have restored these verses in the new critical edition of the poem differently. The words where I have differed from the Moscow editors are put in bold print here (vi:139:82-83):

چو کوتاه بُ د شاخ و هم بیخشان	نگوید جهان‌دیده تاریخشان
ا زیرا ج ز از نام نشنیده‌ام	نه در نامه خسروان دیده‌ام





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Because they did not last, root and branch
The sage says nothing of their history
For this reason, I have neither heard
Nor seen but their names in the *Book of Kings*.

By changing ازیشان “from them,” which is the simpler reading of all but one manuscript, to زیرا “for this reason,” which is the more difficult (and therefore the more likely) reading of the Leiden manuscript, the sense of the verses changes considerably. It is no longer possible to assume that Ferdowsi had not seen *any* information about the Parthians in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. He is clearly saying that because these kings did not leave behind much information, he heard nothing but their names, which he also saw in the *Book of Kings*. In other words, the names of the Parthian kings *were* mentioned in the *Book of Kings*. However, that book contained little more than a list of their names. Without getting into details about *Shāhnāmeḥ* versions, a recently discovered manuscript of the poem permits a clearer reading. Professor Iraj Afshar and I intend to publish this new manuscript in facsimile. Based on this new material, and on the text of a *Shāhnāmeḥ* manuscripts in the *Bibliothèque National* in Paris (Suppl. Pers. 493), the second hemistich of the second line can now be restored as follows:

ازیرا جز از نام نشنیده‌ام که در نامه خسروان دیده‌ام

For this reason, I have heard nothing but their names
Which I have seen in the *Book of Kings*.

Restoring the word نه “nor” to که “which” in the second hemistich makes a major difference in the meaning of the second line, and leads to a complete reinterpretation of this passage. I have discussed this textual problem in greater detail in the notes.⁴

Hand-copied manuscripts, especially ancient ones, often have by their very nature vague and messy readings, which are quite different from the clean and clear texts of printed editions. What most people read in published version of classical Persian texts is some editor's reading of what he sees, or thinks he sees, in the manuscripts from which he has prepared his edition. That's a fact, so in this case the question of whether the Parthians





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were mentioned in Ferdowsi's prose archetype is not as incontrovertible as some Neo-Orientalist might imagine it to be. Let me now say a few words about Parthian literature, another controversial subject—especially in relation to the *Shāhnāme*'s history.

Although most scholarship on pre-Islamic Iranian literature presents Parthians as a people without a significant literary tradition,⁵ the evidence of early Arabic authors gives a different impression. In a heavily sourced article about the relationship between the *Shāhnāme* and its pre-Islamic sources, Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh has taken the standard view of Parthian literature to task. He provides specific evidence from the works of the historians, Ibn Khurradādhbih (circa 825-911), Tabari (839-923), and al-Tha'ālebi (961-1038), which establishes that these authors had access to extensive narratives about kings and heroes that were derived from Parthian sources.⁶ Khaleghi concludes that a tradition of composing historical epics, which was rooted in the material of the Achaemenid archives, must have existed in the Parthian period, though much of it is not mentioned in the *Shāhnāme*. I will have more to say about the history of the *Shāhnāme* in a later chapter. For now, let's continue reviewing Iranian history.

The Parthians were overthrown by the Sassanids (Per. Sāsāniyān) after a ten-year series of bloody wars between Ardashir and the last Arsacid king Artabanus IV (Pers. Ardavān). At last, Ardashir managed to defeat and kill Ardavān in 224 AD. Then he proclaimed himself "the King of Kings." This was the beginning of the Sassanid Empire that reigned over Iran for more than four centuries.

The origins of the Sassanid dynasty, with its famous kings and opulent court, remains obscure. Its founder, Ardashir was probably the son of Pāpag (Pers. Bābak), who might have served as priest at a temple dedicated to Anāhita, the Zoroastrian goddess of waters, in the province of Fārs in modern Iran. Ardashir was not Pāpag's only son, and he was not his eldest, in line for the throne. In fact, it was Ardashir's elder brother, Shāpur, whom Pāpag chose to succeed him. But Ardashir, who commanded a fortress in Dārābgerd in eastern Fārs (Persis), refused to abide by his father's wishes and either during Pāpag's lifetime, or shortly after his death, rebelled against Shāpur. It was pure luck—or perhaps something more sinister—that Shāpur

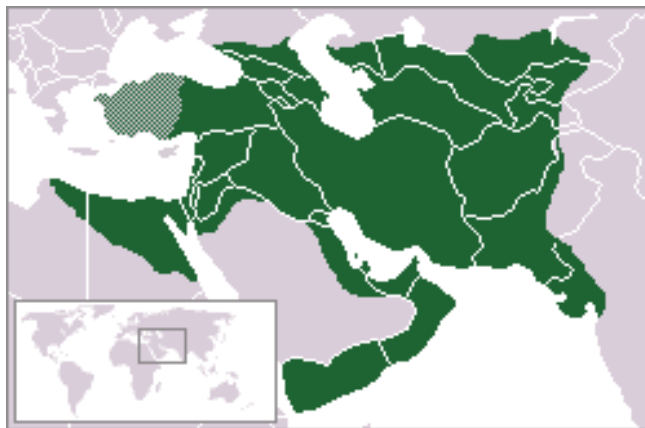




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died before the brothers could engage in what was bound to have been a protracted war of succession. Following Shāpur's death, Ardashir concentrated on defeating Ardavān IV, and permanently overthrew the Parthians.⁷

Thirty two Sassanid emperors—including two usurpers and two women—succeeded Ardashir to the throne, and the Sassanid realm and bureaucracy expanded exponentially. Under Khosrow II (591-628) who is known to most Persians as Khosrow Parviz, the empire reached an immense extent.⁸ Its colossal reach included *all* of present day Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and parts of Egypt, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Libya, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Its domain approached almost two million square miles.



The Sassanid Empire circa 610 AD

I emphasize the size of the Sassanid empire because I want to stress that no matter what you may hear about the primitive “orality” of pre-Islamic Persian civilization, this vast empire could not possibly have functioned without a highly sophisticated and literate bureaucracy that controlled its finances, communications, laws, and educational system. This bureaucracy depended on a literate class of officials who maintained it for over four hundred years. Most of this officialdom, as we shall see in the next chapter, survived the Arab conquest and formed the core of vast Muslim bureaucracies that—broadly speaking—remained intact until





the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century.

The scribes who served the central government as well as the provincial administrations of the great aristocratic families in the empire were not necessarily priests; proof that literacy under the Sassanids was not limited to religious orders. This fact may be deduced from several pieces of evidence. First, the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, which as we shall see in a later chapter, is based on a literary epic tradition created by these men, is a purely secular document. Some personages who are revered by Zoroastrians are presented quite negatively in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. For instance, King Goshtāsp, the greatest patron of Zoroastrian religion, is portrayed as a villain. Had priests anything to do with the poem, they would have depicted him very differently. Second, no early Arabic sources indicate that the Sassanid literati were *necessarily* also priests. Third, the titles of a large number of Middle Persian books and documents that were translated into Arabic after the conquest have come down to us. Because most of these works are non-religious, a rich secular literary tradition must have existed in Sassanid Iran.

The very existence of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* tells us that Sassanid society placed a premium on formal education. Because this is an important point as far as the question of the great epic's oral or literary origins are concerned, I will digress a little and present the evidence.

I. Sassanid Literacy:

According to the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, not only the Sassanid rulers, but even some of the prehistoric rulers of Iran were literate. Clearly then, literacy was a longstanding tradition among the Iranian elite. For instance, when one of these princes, Goshtāsp, leaves his father's court and goes to Greece incognito and destitute, he looks for a job as a scribe (5:15:166 – 173):

همی رفت ناشاد، دل پر ز داد	چو چیزی که بودش بخورد و بداد
از ایوان دیوان قیصر گذشت	چو در شهر آباد چندی بگشت
از ایران یکی نامجویم دبیر	بلاستف چنین گفت کای دستگیر
ز دیوان کنم هرچ آید پسند	بدین کار باشم ترا یارمند
همی کرد هر یک به دیگر نگاه،	دبیران که بودند در بارگاه
همان روی قرطاس بریان شود	کزین کلک پولاد گریان شود،





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Having spent and bestowed all that he had
 He walked depressed, but his heart full of righteousness.
 He wondered for a while in town
 Until he came upon the Caesar's chancery.
 He addressed the bishop, saying: "O charitable [master]!
 I am an Iranian scribe in search of fortune.
 I can assist you in your business,
 And can do all that is required to your liking."
 The other chancery scribes exchanged glances
 [Whispering]: "A pen of steel will weep in his hand,
 And the parchment will be [hopelessly] scarred by his force

Aside from such references in the stories of the pre-historic kings, which must reflect Sassanid attitudes, the *Shāhnāme* makes extensive reference to literacy among Sassanid kings, and their attitude toward it. For instance, it chronicles how Ardashir's bureaucracy was carefully managed by the king and by his learned overseers, who were not only literate but also skilled in calligraphy and possessed of considerable eloquence (vi:216-217: 315-324):

به بی دانشان کار نگذاشتی	به دیوانش کار آگهان داشتی
کسی کو بُدی چیره تریک نُقط،	بلاغت نگه داشتندی و خط
شهنشاه کردیش روزی فزون	چو برداشتی آن سخن رهنمون
نرفتی به دیوان شاه اردشیر	کسی را که کمتر بُدی خط و ویر
قلم زن بماندی بر شهریار	سوی کاردارن شدنیدی به کار
چو دیدی به درگاه مردِ دبیر	ستاینده بُد شهریار اردشیر
هم از رای او گنج بپراگنید	نبیسنده، گفتی که گنج آگنید
همان زیردستان فریاد خواه	بدو باشد آباد شهر و سپاه
همه پادشا بر نهان من اند	دبیران چو پیوند جان من اند

He kept experts in his administration
 And refused to engage the incompetent
 The experts watched for those of eloquence and penmanship
 Even those of only slightly superior skill.
 When such was found and reported,





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The emperor increased his stipend.
 Those of inferior penmanship and wit
 Could not join King Ardashir's chancery.
 But were sent to his officers
 While skilled scribes remained with the King.
 King Ardashir was praiseful
 Of court officials who were skilled in scribal arts.
 And used to say, fill the treasury by his advice
 And spend according to his council
 My realm and army flourish because of such men
 As will citizens who seek justice.
 Scribes are like my very life,
 They all are sovereigns of my soul.

Education was not limited to the children of the aristocracy, but was apparently also available to the offspring of wealthy commoners (vi: 222: 404-405, 408-409):

چوبی مایه گشتی یکی مایه دار	وزان آگهی یافتی شهریار،
چو بایست بر ساختی کاراوی	نماندی چنان تیره بازاراوی...
همان کودکش را به فرهنگیان	سپردی چو بودی ورا هنگ آن
به هر برزنی در دبستان بدی	همان خان آتش پرستان بدی

When a rich man fell on hard times,
 And the King was informed of it,
 He would help the man fittingly
 And would not allow his misfortune to last
 He would send his children—
 If they were talented—to tutors
 There were schools in every quarter of towns
 And also fire-temples.

The existence of public schools in which elementary religious instruction was combined with the teaching of reading and writing is implied in the story of the vizier, Buzarjomehr (vii:169-170), who expresses his approval of public education by advising that all young children should be sent to school (vii:190:1222). Teaching the scribal arts, and encouraging the young to learn penmanship and rhetoric were considered highly desirable





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(vii: 213:1493-1500). Being cultured (*bā farhang*), of which literacy was an indispensable part, was considered superior even to being of noble stock (vii: 294:2527-2530):

ز دانا بیرسید پس دادگر که فرهنگ بهتر بود گر گهر
چنین داد پاسخ بدو رهنمون که فرهنگ باشد ز گوهر فزون
که فرهنگ آرایش جان بود ز گوهر سخن گفتن آسان بود
گهر بی هنر زار و خوارست و سست به فرهنگ باشد روان تندرست

Then the just king asked the sage:
Which is better, culture or lineage?
The sage answered him thus:
Culture is superior to lineage
Because culture is the soul's adornment
But it is easy to brag of [one's] lineage
High birth without culture is wretched, vile, and weak
The soul is made sound by culture.

It appears that the general education available to all who could afford it must have been relatively basic. Much more advanced and specialized education was provided only to the children of officialdom, and initiates to the priesthood received a highly specialized education. This is evident in the story of a wealthy shoe merchant who petitioned the king to have his son accepted into a special school for scribes. In exchange, he offered to loan a great deal of money to the king, who was in need of quick cash to finance a war. But the king refused to grant his request, so that the caste system that separated the scribal and merchant classes would not be disturbed (vii: 435-438). In spite of this, as Bijan Gheiby has convincingly argued,⁹ education must have been more broadly available than is commonly believed, and the king's prohibition in this story must relate only to the specialized education of boys who came from the scribal class.

Children of the nobility, and especially royal princes, were educated in scribal arts as well as the arts of war. Ardashir advised his successors to spare no effort in educating their children in these skills (vi: 227: 481). Similarly, the heroic king *Bahrām-e Gur* was taught to read and write at the age of seven (vi: 369:110-111), by the time he was king he could





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write exceptionally well (vi: 599:2407). His father-in-law, Shangol, who was literate himself (vi: 603:2459-2461), and could recognize his son-in-law's handwriting (vi: 599:2408). Of course Bahrām is by no means the only literate Sassanid ruler. According to the *Shāhnāme*, the famous heretic Mazdak who feels that the prince opposes his religious innovations, demands a promissory oath from the crown prince (vii:75:286). King Qobād (r. 488-531) was also literate and the *Shāhnāme* quite specifically states that he wrote out his will in his own hand because he was skilled in scribal arts. In his will, Qobād orders the nobles who see his handwriting to obey his son and successor Anushirvān (vii: 81:359-364), which implies that he considered his aristocracy not only literate enough to read, but also able to recognize his handwriting. Later, Anushirvān's son, Hormazd IV (r. 579-590) is told of a letter in his father's handwriting, which he proceeds to consult (vii: 481:204, 482:212, 218).

When the Roman emperor sends help to Khosrow Parviz (591-628 A.D.), the king writes out a peace and friendship treaty in his own hand (viii:102:1334-1336, and 104:1360):

بپرداخت خسرو ز بیگانه جای	چن ایشان بر آن گونه دیدند رای
بفرمود تا پیش او شد دبیر	دویت و قلم خواست و چینی حریر
بر آیین شاهان خط خسروی	یکی نامه بنیشت بر پهلوی
که خط من اندر جهان روشنست	نبشته سراسر به خط منست

When they approved the policy
 Khosrow made all but his confidants leave
 And asked for inkwell, pen, Chinese silk,
 And ordered a scribe to come as well.
 He [then] wrote a letter in Pahlavi language
 In the manner of kings, and in royal script.
 [In which he said]: all this is written in my own handwriting,
 Which is recognizable to all throughout the world

Khosrow Parviz manages to defuse another crisis by seducing a warrior woman to whom he sends a letter in his own handwriting (viii:225:2971, 226:2976-2981); and the woman shows the king's handwriting to the aristocrats in her entourage (viii:227:2989, 2994, 2997), and later re-





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sponds to it by her own hand (viii:228:3009-3010). Ferdowsi, however, is careful to state that Persian kings were literate only in their own language. For instance, when Khosrow Parviz receives a letter in Indian script from the king of India, he summons one of his Indian scribes to translate it for him (viii:336:164-166).

Not only the kings, but also the Sassanid aristocrats are depicted as literate in the *Shāhnāmeh*. When he rebelled against the crown, the usurper general, Bahrām-e Chubin (590-591), demanded and obtained the signatures of the court aristocracy on a loyalty oath (viii:67:862-865):

نشست از بر تخت، بهرامشاه	به سر بر نهاد آن کیانی کلاه
دبیرش بیاورد عهدِ کیان	نشته بر آن پر بها پر نیان
گواهی نبشتند یکسر مهان	که بهرام شد شهریار جهان
بر آن نامه چون نام کردند یاد	برو بر یکی مهر زرین نهاد

King Bahrām sat upon the throne
And donned the royal crown
His scribe brought the royal oath
That was written upon costly silk
And all the nobles wrote testimonials
That Bahrām is the king of the world
When they signed their names upon that document
He sealed it by a golden seal

This information will be useful later when we discuss the *Shāhnāmeh*'s history. For now, let's finish looking at the Sassanids.

Sassanid administration sank into chaos between 628, when Khosrow Parviz was deposed, and 632, when the last emperor of this dynasty, Yazdgerd III, ascended the throne. Depending on which historian you believe, between six to ten monarchs—two were women—ruled Iran in the space of four years.¹⁰ The political turmoil of these years is partly why the Arab incursion into Iranian territory was destined to succeed. Although the Arabs gradually succeeded in conquering Iran, and although Iranians slowly converted to Islam, the success of the conquest and the conversion was due more to the internal dynamics of Iranian culture than to the conquerors' missionary or military efforts. This, of course, is not to say that





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there were no efforts made to convert Iranians to Islam—peacefully or otherwise. But on the whole, both the conquest and the conversion came about for other reasons. The most important was the chaos in the Sassanid state and society. The empire's central government had become, for all intents and purposes, dysfunctional years before the conquest. And when its peripheral defenses were overwhelmed, it was practically blown away by the invading Arab armies. Moreover, a large number of local aristocratic families and administrators could no longer depend on the central government for help in resisting the invasion. So they concluded peace treaties with the Arabs, and a large number gradually converted to Islam. Meanwhile, many of the invaders either married into the local Iranian aristocracy, or sired half-Iranian sons with their Iranian slave-women and concubines. And in time, the twin processes of conversion and intermarriage changed the character of the Iranian society. So, by the time of Ferdowsi, Islam was an inherent part of our culture. It is natural, then, that Ferdowsi proclaims his devotion to Islam at the beginning of Iran's national epic.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For a brief but very useful summary of their rule see Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sassanian Empire* (London / New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008), pp.19-47 and the references therein.
- 2 نگاه کنید به مهدی سیدی، فرهنگ جغرافیای تاریخی ترکمنستان (مرو میهنه، ابیورد، نسا، خوارزم، فراوه، دهستان) (مشهد: مؤسسه چاپ و انتشارات آستان قدس رضوی، ۱۳۸۳/۲۰۵) ذیل مدخل «دهستان».
- 3 Frye, *Heritage*, pp.188 ff.
- 4 I believe the orthographic similarity in the forms of the words *که* and *نه* in our manuscripts justifies this restoration. I don't have a digital picture of the verse in the Paris manuscript, but the following images from the newly discovered Beirut manuscript of the poem and those of the older Cairo (S. 6006) and one of the British Library codices (Or. 1403) can adequately help the non-specialist reader judge the situation for himself.





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Given the fact that Ferdowsi either wrote که or نه in the second hemistich of this verse, and that his original intent was corrupted as the *Shāhnāmah* was copied and recopied over the centuries, the question is: which of these words is likely to be correct? Several time tested techniques of editing and a number of clues help us make an educated guess.

First, look at the negative sense of the sentence, "I have not heard but their names + nor have I seen them [i.e., the names] in the *Book of Kings*." The word نه in the second hemistich is the simpler and easier reading in this context. There is a rule in editing that states that of two manuscript variants, the one that is more difficult is also more likely to be correct. This rule implies that scribes are more likely to change a difficult word to a simpler one. In other words, a scribe who does not understand a word in a passage readily, is more likely to change it to something that he *does* understand than he is to change a simple or more understandable word to one that is more difficult. In this specific example, because of the negative sense of the sentence as a whole, the scribes were more likely to change Ferdowsi's original که in the beginning of the second hemistich to نه, because the negative sentence mentally predisposed them to that move. In other word, some scribes may have mentally changed an original که to نه because of the negative verb of the first part of the verse. Furthermore, if the original form of the hemistich had the simple and easy reading of نه there would have been no reason for any scribe to create the more difficult and less clear reading که rather than simply copying the original نه of his exemplar.

Second, the shape of the words in question, and their placement in the verse would make the change from که to نه reasonable. The words که and نه are generally of the same shape. Although as you can see in the first picture (Beirut manuscript), the word که may be read quite clearly, one can easily imagine that if this word were written close to the ruling between the two hemistiches of the verse, its initial vertical letter, ک, could run into the vertical lines of the ruling, and it could become practically indistinguishable from the initial ن of the word نه, thus leading to a misreading. The reading of the Cairo manuscript shows how the initial letter of the word may be covered up by the ruling between the parts of a distich. The word نه is written very close to the ruling between the two hemistiches in this manuscript, and except for its dot, the word نه could be easily read as که in the Cairo codex. I have presented the third picture as an example of those codices that have an unmistakable reading نه in this verse.

- 5 مثلاً نگاه کنید به: احمد تفضلی. تاریخ ادبیات ایران پیش از اسلام. به کوشش ژاله آموزگار (تهران: سخن، ۱۳۷۶)، صص ۸۱-۷۳.
- 6 The full text of this important paper is available on the internet at: <http://www.noufe.com/persish/Khaleghi/pdf/azshahnametakhtodayname.pdf>. See pp.42 ff.
- 7 For a succinct history of the Sassanid state see Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Iran (224-651 CE): Portrait of a Late Antique Empire* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2008). Professor Daryaee has recently published a more detail history of the Sassanids. See his *Sassanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2009).
- 8 Touraj Daryaee. *Sassanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), pp.32-33.
- 9 بیژن غیبی. خویشکاری ریدکان و اندرز به کودکان (بیلقلد، آلمان: انتشارات نمودار، ۲۰۰۳)، صص ۱۵-۱۳.
- 10 See Pourshariati. *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, pp. 153-287, in which she makes a serious attempt to introduce some order into the chaotic data of our sources.





Chapter 4



It Ain't Necessarily So: Language, Invasion, Identity

De t'ings dat yo li'ble
To read in de Bible -
It ain't necessarily so.
(Lyrics from the Jazz opera, *Porgy And Bess*, 1935)

Most Iranians know the following verses in the *Shāhnāmeḥ* by heart; and even those who don't know them by heart, are familiar with the point they make (viii:419:105-106):

از ایران و از ترک و از تازیان نژادی پدید آید اندر میان
نه دهقان، نه ترک و نه تازی بود سخن ها بکردار بازی بود

A mongrel race will appear
From the mixing of Persians, Turks, and Arabs
That will be neither Iranian, nor Turkish, nor Arab
Their words will be as worthless gibberish.

The man who expresses these sentiments is the Sassanid general, Rostam, who died in battle against the invading Arab Muslims. Rostam was both a military leader and an astrologer who consulted the stars before going into his last battle. His astrological forecast of Iran's future appears in the *Shāhnāmeḥ* as a last letter to his brother, written shortly





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before his fatal defeat. Rostam's contempt for the "mongrel race" that he predicts will be produced from a mingling of Arab, Turkish, and Iranian bloods is understandable in view of his position and circumstances. Today, though, there is something strange about the elation these verses excite in Iranians who read or hear them. They apparently don't understand that the people Rostam contemptuously derides as despicable "mongrels" is them: modern Iranians.

Let's consider the context of Rostam's words. Given the turbulent history of Persia since the Arab invasion thirteen hundred years ago, not to mention our ancient and imperial past that stretches back beyond most other civilizations, all of us Iranians *are* a mix of Persian, Arab, Turkish, and any number of other "bloods." Arab invasion aside, *all* empires, almost by definition, have diverse populations, because they bring a diverse group of linguistic and ethnic populations under a single, usually centralized administration. Romans, Chinese, Ottoman, and more recently, British and American empires have all spread their culture, thought, and institutions across many peoples, while being changed themselves by their subjects. For this reason, the so-called mixing of "bloods" is the natural state of empires. The Old Persian inscription of Darius the Great (522-486 B.C.), in which he refers to himself as "King of Kings, King in Persia, King of countries," and enumerates the peoples that formed his empire, makes the point with methodical exactness:

Saith Darius the King: These are the countries which came unto me; by the favor of Ahuramazda I was king of them: Persia, Elam, Babylonia, Assyria, Arabia, Egypt, (those) who are beside the sea, Sardis, Ionia, Media, Armenia, Cappadocia, Parthia, Drangiana, Aria, Chorasmia, Bactria, Sogdiana, Gandara, Scythia, Sattagydia, Arachosia, Maka: in all, 28 provinces. Saith Darius the King: Within these countries, the man who was loyal, him I rewarded well; (him) who was evil, him I punished well; by the favor of Ahuramazda these countries showed respect toward my law; as was said to them by me, thus was it done.¹

Note that the king does not speak of ruling over these countries by virtue of his superior race. He rules by grace of God, and he expects the subject peoples to show obedience to his law and administration. This is a crucial





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feature of all empires that ruled in Persia and her adjacent territories. Unfortunately, this feature has been sidestepped in Iranian intellectuals' assessments of Persian history because of their recent attempts to discover racial superiority over their neighbors. I will discuss this in greater detail later. For now, let's look again at Rostam's scornful reference to the inferior race that is a mix of Arab, Turk, and Iranian blood and will inhabit his country after the Muslim conquest.

The ancestors of modern Iranians survived Greek, Arab, Turkish, and Mongol invasions and rebuilt their devastated country each time. They are the "mongrel" objects of Rostam's cutting remarks. The implications of the general's statements are that the pre-conquest Persians of the Sassanid period—very definitely including *himself*—are somehow superior to the mixed race of Iranians after the Arab invasion. As I pointed out before, the notion that an empire can have a homogenous population is absurd. But let us assume that he is right and test his assertions by comparing the recent accomplishments of us mutts with those of the purebred general and his contemporaries. We shall give the general an implicit advantage by comparing the two groups with respect to their relative success in the area of national defense, which is after all, the general's profession.

From 1980 through 1988, Saddam Hossein perpetrated a continuous bloody onslaught into Iran. Outnumbered, outgunned and hampered with post-revolutionary chaos, Iranian mongrels died by the hundreds of thousands to protect their country. They fought off a modern Arab army that was exceptionally well-equipped with American and European armaments and thoroughly supported by an alliance of western and regional powers. They sacrificed life and limb, coughed up bloody chunks of their lungs after every chemical attack, sacrificed their eyes that burst from their sockets, and the flesh that blistered off their bodies. They gave up their lives, but not one single inch of Iranian territory. The mongrel people of Iran carried out this tragic sacrifice right in the Global Village's center and in plain sight of an international mass media. Nevertheless, world news organizations looked away for seven long months—in spite of Iran's repeated complaints to the United Nations that Saddam used weapons of mass destruction on Persian forces, border cities and villages.

The Western media disregarded all this pain and suffering for almost





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a year, from June 1987 to March, 1988. Western consciences were finally shocked out of apathetic silence when Saddam unleashed the same chemical savagery upon the West's own allies, the Iraqi Kurds.²

Iranians who feel a tinge of pride at hearing the verses with which I opened this chapter should step back and compare Rostam's military failure with the achievements of our "race of mongrels" in defending the homeland. The general led a powerful imperial army, equipped with the finest available tools of war, including an armored cavalry and war-elephants, against a rag-tag band of invading Arab tribesmen. However, in spite of the numerical and technological superiority of his forces, he lost the battle, the war, and his country's independence. One of the contributing factors to the cataclysm must have been his certainty of defeat, which he believed was written in the stars. By contrast, the army of "mongrels," in spite of being poorly equipped and internationally isolated, faced a better equipped Arab force, but managed to fight the invaders off. The mutts succeeded where Rostam failed.

According to the existing oral histories and official records of the war, many Iranian volunteers walked to the battlefield barefoot. Thousands had no weapons, uniforms, or any other military gear. According to the website of Mohsen Rezai, the Revolutionary Guard commander of the time, scores of volunteers drove to the front line in their personal vehicles because the army had no vehicles to transport them.³ In spite of all this chaotic dysfunction, and in contrast to Rostam's lavishly equipped forces, this tattered crowd of Iranian volunteers stood their ground and defended their homeland against a materially superior invading force. The "mongrels" generously bled out that mix of Persian, Arab, Turkish and who-knows-what blood on every battlefield and drove the invaders out of Iran. They did not waste time stargazing and anticipating defeat; but simply did the job. Let us put military matters aside and look at other areas of accomplishment.

Every great Persian poet from Rudaki (d. c. 940) and Ferdowsi (c. 940-1020) himself, to Nimā (1896-1960), Akhavan-e Sāles (1928-1990), and Naderpour (1929-2000) belongs to this race of mongrels. Furthermore, every Persian scientist from Rhazes, (d. 925) and Avicenna (d. 1037) to the young physicists whose advances in nuclear technology have caused





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such homicidal paranoia in the Western world also has the same mixed cocktail of Arab, Persian, and Turkish bloods in his veins.⁴ The same may be said for *all* the important philosophers, artists, theologians, and other intellectual giants who people the cultural history of our country after Islam. Pre-Islamic Iranian contributions to these fields of learning and art are practically nil, and the nonsensical argument that the corpus of the pre-Islamic learning was “burned” or otherwise intentionally destroyed by the invaders, remains absurd and without any serious documentary support. Much is naturally destroyed in the fires of war both accidentally and otherwise. Books are no exception. However, the suggestion that Arabs *intentionally* destroyed *all* of Iran’s pre-Islamic learning is no longer taken seriously by any specialists. It is, however, endlessly repeated by the members of the general public whose ignorance of the relevant primary sources is exceeded only by their unbridled ethnocentrism.

Let me conclude this part of my argument by once again reminding my fellow Iranians who still delight in quoting the general’s words that these words are about them. The brooding general belittles and insults us all. Because he was neither wise nor heroic, I find the tremor of pointless pride that his words produce in too many of us both offensive and incomprehensible. Every Iranian must understand once and for all that the sense of pride and superiority created by these verses is, in its core, nothing but self-loathing. Just like a racist who in the hatred of his victim abhors himself, we Iranians—in our gleeful endorsement of Rostam’s racist remarks—manage to detest only ourselves. That’s the nature of prejudice. It stupefies, dims the wit, and distorts perception. I have kept focus on the implications of Persians’ response to these verses because I want to make a relevant point about the *Shāhnāmeḥ* in the light of the Muslim conquest.

As a cultural icon of our nation, the *Shāhnāmeḥ* readily invokes a deep emotional response in every Iranian. The nature of that response makes dispassionate and scholastic discussions of it with members of the general public inherently difficult. Most people are ignorant of the nature of the poem’s primary sources, and are only hazily aware of the historical context of its creation. Furthermore, most events and personages that are associated with it have become infused with affect and symbolic significance. Most Iranians perceive these events and personages as either purely





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good or purely evil, and tend to respond accordingly. The *Shāhnāmeḥ* has such a hold on our collective soul and our favorite passages in it move us to such heights of emotionality that most of us are content to leave it at that. We have already had a glimpse of this reaction in our discussion of Alexander's invasion of Persia. Iranians' response to the history of the Muslim conquest has been even more beset by emotion and ambivalence. This response reaches its pitch in *Shāhnāmeḥ* scholarship for obvious reasons. It is in this area of literary research above all others that the ideas of Iranian and non-Iranian, pre-Islamic and Muslim, "us" and "them," tragedy and triumph and all our many human contradictions find their most blatant expressions. Nationalism, ethnocentrism, and borrowed xenophobia are concocted into a fierce anti-Arab sentiment that informs almost all considerations of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, its poet, and the cultural conditions and personages that surround it. To untangle this web that has wrapped itself around our masterwork we must spend some time on the story of Iran's conquest by the Arabs, sort fact from fiction, and at least try to put things in their proper historical contexts.

I. Race, Identity, and Story as History

The great 19th century student of Zoroastrian literature, James Darmesteter (1849-1894), was Jewish. As a Jew, he endured all the inequities that the 19th century European Jewish community suffered because of Europeans' misguided preoccupation with notions of race. He wrote in 1895:

The historical sciences in this century have subsisted on a single idea, that of race. When one lives on a single idea, one is at last apt to die of it. The idea of race, after having revived, or rather created, modern history, has for some time begun to render it sterile and to pervert it; it has had its day, and ought to give way to a new idea, that of tradition.⁵

Darmesteter was a native of Alsace, which has a turbulent history and a cultural identity torn between its German and French components. His observation, informed by the Alsatian Franco-German rivalries as it is, applies mostly to the European scene. However, it might as well have been addressed to some of the students of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, and more generally to Persian scholars of Iranian cultural history.





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Influenced by Western European cultural notions about race, most Iranian *Shāhnāme* scholars assess the Muslim conquest of their country in racial terms. They treat it as a cultural tragedy that led to Iran's humiliation and defeat; and view Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* as a nationalist response to that disgraceful debacle. Echoing Rostam's bitter warnings about the post-conquest mixing of Arab, Persian, and Turkish bloods, these scholars believe that the invasion produced an inferior race, which by its incompetence and inadequacy put an end to the vibrant and glorious culture of pre-Islamic Persia. The anti-Arab dimension of this xenophobia is routinely expressed in the relatively recent revival of the archaic Persian word for "Arab," *tāzī* (from Middle Persian, *tāzīg*). Aside from its awkwardness, the use of this archaism in much recent *Shāhnāme* scholarship has an ugly side: the New Persian word *tāzī* also means "hunting dog." The derogatory implications of digging up and reusing this word should be obvious to all.

The cruel crudity of such referential modes has become standardized in Persian scholarly discourse. Thus, well-regarded, mainstream liberal scholars use them without concern for their implications. For instance, Professor Zabihollah Safa (1911-1999), the preeminent scholar of Iran's literary history, laments the "calamities" that followed the Arab invasion and bemoans the appearance of the "mixture of Persian, Arab, and Turkish races."⁶ Sa'id Nafisi (1896-1966), an important authority on Iranian culture and history, who had liberal if not leftist leanings, derisively speaks of the "language in which we speak today" as a "pidgin concoction of classical Persian and Arabic," and blames it on the mixing of Arabs and Persians in the 8th century.⁷

The facts of the Muslim invasion are very different from the views reflected in the scholarship of Safa, Nafisi, and many others. Facts are there in the historic record. It may be objectively demonstrated that shortly after the Arab conquest, Iran entered one of the most dynamic and vibrant periods of its intellectual history. Major philosophical, scientific, and literary figures appeared in Persia, and left a lasting influence upon the subsequent development of Islamic civilization. The architects of post-invasion intellectual revolution were producing their works in the Arabic language, which was the *lingua franca* of the empire. However, as we shall





see in the next chapter, there's no doubt about their Iranian ethnicity and self-identification. For now, let's consider what circumstances led to the almost effortless Arab victory.

II. Marching into Chaos:

The Arab conquest of Iran began as a series of expeditionary campaigns to test the empire's defenses. Muslim leaders soon realized that they were not going to face any serious resistance, and increased the pace and frequency of their attacks. An Arab general attacked the kingdom of al-Hira, in south central Iraq, and drove out its Persian governor, Hormozān. Originally, al-Hira was an Iranian client state, whose ruler Monzer was instrumental in helping Bahrām V (420-438) ascend the throne. The conquest of al-Hira removed a major obstacle between Iran and the advancing Arab armies. The Muslims could now advance to the Tigris River virtually unopposed. A series of battles ensued, with Iranian forces managing to offer only anemic resistance. The decisive defeat at Qādesiyya in 636 put Persian forces on the run. Rostam, the occultist general whom we met in the previous section, and the Arab warlord Sa'd ibn Waqqās, fought near the Qādesiyya fortifications, somewhere between the cities of Hilla and Kufa in modern Iraq. By this battle's end, Iran's national standard, the *Kavian* banner (Persian: *derafsh-e kāviyān*) was captured by the Arabs.

After a series of Persian defeats, Muslims finally managed to enter the Iranian capital in the spring of 637. By 640 they had almost unhindered access to inner Iran. Sporadic resistance, especially by the military governor of al-Hira, Hormozān, continued until 642. But he was finally taken prisoner, and brought before the Caliph Omar in Medina. Hormozān, impressed by the Caliph's asceticism and piety, converted to Islam. Hormozān's capture led to the Persian Empire's end that year, with one last defeat, in the Battle of Nahāvand.

The Arabs went on to rapidly conquer Azerbaijan (643-644), Esfahān, Qomm, Kāshān, and central and northern Iran (644-645). Despite occasional fierce resistance, for instance by Shahrak, the governor of Fārs, Muslims managed to advance almost unimpeded into Iran, and succeeded in conquering the largest cities in that important province. Finally, in





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649, the ancient city of Estakhr and all the territory near Persepolis were captured, forcing the emperor Yazdgerd III to flee into eastern Iran. At that point, all obstacles to a complete takeover were gone; and the invaders could continue their advance eastward, toward India.

In the east, Yazdgerd asked for assistance from the Chinese emperor, who rejected him, and from the Turkish ruler, the *Khāqān*, who did come to his aid. However, even with *Khāqān's* help, the emperor was unable to impede the Arab advance. Soon, Yazdgerd was pushed across the river Oxus, where he sought refuge in the city of *Balkh*, some twenty kilometers to the northeast of *Mazār-e Sharīf*, in modern day Afghanistan. The Arabs pressed on, and although Yazdgerd tried to convince local Iranian nobles (*dehqāns*) to either stand and fight or accompany him to China in order to regroup and counterattack, the nobles preferred to make peace with Arabs. The disagreement between the emperor and the *dehqāns* grew to open rebellion; the nobles seized Yazdgerd's treasury and sent him fleeing to *Kāqān's* court. Finally, in 651 or 652, when Yazdgerd was about thirty five years of age, he was murdered—either by the forces of his own local Iranian governor, or by a miller in a robbery attempt.⁸ Whoever killed him threw his corpse into a nearby river; as a final indignity. The current carried his corpse downriver, until his remains snagged in the branches of a tree. The local Christian bishop recognized Yazdgerd's desecrated body, and had it fished out and buried.

Little is known about the fate of Yazdgerd's children. According to the historian Mas'udi he had two sons and three daughters, one of whom, a princess by the name of Shahr-bānu, later married the grandson of the prophet Mohammad, Imam Hossein. She is thus the mother of the fourth Shiite Imam, 'Ali ibn al-Hossein, also known as Zeyn al-'Ābedeyn (d. 713). So, as far as Iranians are concerned, the Shiite Imams inherited the royal legitimacy of Persian pre-Islamic emperors.⁹ According to the historian Hamza (c. 893-961), Yazdgerd had been murdered by Māhuy, a Persian aristocrat from the city of Merv; and for more than three hundred years afterwards, Māhuy's descendants were known by the nickname "regicides" (Mid. Per. *khodāy koshān*) in Merv and its environs.¹⁰

There can be little doubt that the Persian Empire's internal turmoil greatly contributed to its downfall. Both this internal strife and the regi-





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cide which preceded the final dissolution, are features that we have already encountered in the fall of the Achaemenid kingdom a thousand years earlier.

Indeed, Sassanid power had begun its woeful downward spiral almost fifty years before the Arabs appeared on the scene. Khosrow II had ascended the throne either in 590 or in 591 with the help of the Byzantine emperor Flavius Mauricius Tiberius (539-602), who had supported him against a powerful rebellious warlord. Therefore, when Flavius Phocas (r. 602-610) deposed and later killed Mauricius, Khosrow attacked Byzantium under the pretext of avenging his ally. Thanks to the internal strife within the Byzantine Empire, Khosrow's forces advanced relatively unopposed. Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria fell in rapid succession, and soon the Persian army was threatening the Byzantine capital of Constantinople. Meanwhile, Phocas was himself deposed and executed by Heraclius (575-641) in 610, and the new emperor launched a counterattack against Iran. He landed his forces in the Caucasus and marched through Armenia and Azerbaijan in order to advance toward the Empire's heart. Heraclius' gamble of taking the fight to Persia paid off. He defeated the Sassanid army, entered Iran, and captured the important religious city of *Shiz* (a town between modern cities of *Marāgheh* and *Zanjān*) in Azerbaijan. The Byzantians continued their advance into Iran, and succeeded in capturing the palace at *Dastgerd* near Ctesiphon in 628.

Alarmed by these developments, the Persian nobility advised their emperor to conclude a peace treaty with Byzantium. When Khosrow refused their advice, the nobles were forced to depose and kill him. Khosrow's son Kavād II (r. 628) succeeded his father but did not last more than six months. Following his death in 628, which was either the result of sickness or by poisoning, a succession of no less than ten kings, queens, and usurpers ascended the Iranian throne; none could stabilize the empire. As Richard Frye, puts it:

The rulers followed one another in a rather rapid succession. They included the general who had captured Jerusalem, Shahrvarāz, "the bore of the state" who ruled a few months before he was assassinated, and two princesses Borān [New Per. *Purān*] and Azarmidokht. After four years of internal warfare and many murders the last Sassanian, a young prince related to Khosrow





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II, was raised to the throne by the nobles. Yazdgerd III was much like the last of the Achaemenids, and if he had had time perhaps he might have saved Persia from the Arabs. It was too late; the Arabs were already united under the banner of Islam ready to embark on the conquest of both the Sassanian and Byzantine empires.¹¹

Muslim armies marched through a chaotic land of endless, devastating wars and a dissipated, weak, and fractious Iranian nobility that was no longer capable of cooperating among themselves—much less governing an Empire. Once the Arabs began their assault, the empire practically fell onto their lap. At the time of their attack the governing class of Persia was not only disorganized but rotten to the core.

Most Iranians have a peculiar notion of the events that transpired during the Arab conquest of the Persian Empire. Like dreamers of nationalist dreams the world over, they have imagined a history based on popular literature and folklore. This imaginary history, like, say, Americans image of themselves, is an amalgam of fact and fancy. It is a popular account, fanciful enough not to deserve the title of history, and true enough to escape being branded as fiction. It weirdly resembles journalism in the United States.

Be that as it may, the popular history of the Arab invasion of Iran goes something like this: the uncouth tribesmen of Arabia took advantage of the exhausted states of the Persian and Byzantine empires and attacked both kingdoms. Armed with the frenzied zeal of their new faith and the fearlessness of devout warriors, they managed to conquer Iran and put Byzantium on the defensive. The invasion not only put an end to the Persian Empire; it also stifled Persian culture and language by pushing both of them to the brink of annihilation. The fierce resistance of the *dehqāns*, the Iranian country aristocracy, might have saved the country. However, the *dehqāns*' resistance was undermined by the general public, especially poor peasants and lower urban classes, who were attracted by Islam's egalitarian message, and converted in droves. In spite of this public betrayal by the ignorant and the opportunistic, the *dehqāns* managed to protect Iran's national traditions, which later formed the nucleus of Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme*.

These circumstances, we are told, also had important implications for





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the future development of Persian language and literature, which we shall discuss in the next chapter. Something needs to be stressed here: this pop version of history implies that the Muslim conquest of Iran practically killed Persian culture, and were it not for Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* and the crucial role which it played in reviving it some four centuries later, all would have been lost. In spite of the prevalence of this nonsense, a more reasonable account of what happened after the invasion may be deduced from existing textual evidence.

III. Of Conquest, Resistance, and Collaboration:

Through the sixth century, two empires ruled the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East: Byzantium and the Sassanids of Persia. Two much smaller Arab kingdoms buffered the giants, the Ghassanids, who were clients of Byzantium in Syria, and the Lakhmids, who were clients of the Sassanids in al-Hira. Until the beginning of the seventh century these Arab kingdoms served two important functions. By separating Iran and Byzantium, they prevented any direct military contact between the two superpowers. These small kingdoms also served as a firewall sealing off the empires from nomadic tribes on the Arabian Peninsula.

However, early in the seventh century, both of these states were destroyed by Khosrow II. This adventurous Sassanid Emperor deposed and killed the Lakhmid ruler in 602, and overran the Ghassanid state during his Byzantine campaigns. Then, as so often in the Middle East, major unintended consequences kicked in. Iran and Byzantium increasingly came into direct conflict because not only the traditional barrier between their territories was removed, but also there was nothing left to protect them against the nomadic warriors of the desert. These desert Arabs—once infamous for their disunity and infighting—were soon united and galvanized under the banner of Islam, and now there was nothing to slow their swift advance into the territories of their weakened imperial neighbors. What was left of the Sassanid's Arab allies valiantly fought the invaders in a series of battles during April and May of 633. Their resistance so angered the Muslim warlord, Khāled ibn al-Walid (592-642), that he treated the Arab captives who served in the Sassanid army with great cruelty.¹²





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Even before the systematic Muslim attack upon Iran, the slippage of Persian control was signaled when a Bedouin confederacy bloodied the Sassanid nose in the battle of Dhu Qār (611), some ten years before the prophet's migration from Mecca to Medina. The encounter took place near the area where the cities of Kufa and Wāset were later built; it proved to the Arabs that Sassanids were no longer as invincible as history and legend suggested. Twenty years later, this victory, widely celebrated in pre-Islamic Arabic verse, was replicated and expanded by the Muslims, who rapidly overcame Iranian defenses, and forced the emperor to flee.

Yazdgerd's flight to the east, as we saw before, is reminiscent of the flight of his Achaemenid predecessor Darius III a millennium earlier. Like Darius, Yazdgerd was murdered by his own nobles, whose treachery played an important role in bringing the empire to an end.¹³ During Yazdgerd's retreat, the governors of the cities of *Rey*, *Kermān*, *Tus*, and *Merv* mistreated him quite severely, and the local aristocrat in *Esfahān* went so far as to beat the royal chamberlain into a bloody pulp.¹⁴ We even have reports of a treasonous Iranian who helped the Arabs take over the imperial palace at Ctesiphon.¹⁵ But these were not isolated instances of betrayal and treachery. We know that during the siege of the city of Susa (N. Per. *Shush*) in southwestern Iran, a group of Persian nobles, who had converted to Islam, joined the invading Arabs, and helped them take the city.¹⁶ According to another version of this event, it was the local *dehqān* who led the Arabs into the city through a secret passageway in exchange for money.¹⁷ Even after the effective disintegration of central authority, it was not the general population so much as local governors and members of the provincial nobility who willingly converted to Islam. Some went over in order to protect their personal property, while others either converted or concluded peace treaties with the Arabs to safeguard the territories under their command and ensure the relative security of the populations under their protection. Many of these treaties are reported by early classical Arabic and Persian sources.¹⁸

IV. A Dance of Cultures:

That cultures change is an incontestable fact. The rate of change, or its form and extent may be debatable; but its reality may not. The con-





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quest of Iran by Islam has led to important changes in Iranian culture, which has metamorphosed by the fusing of Muslim religion, esthetics and philosophy into something different but deeply connected to its pre-Islamic form. Over the fourteen centuries since the invasion, Islam has been completely incorporated into Persian civilization. The incorporation has been so profound that, even if Islam is not considered our culture's warp, it is unquestionably its woof. No amount of atavistic longing for the pre-Islamic "golden age" and the country's Zoroastrian glory days can alter this fact. I am not a gambling man, but I would confidently take any stakes to back the proposition that if Iranians were offered the chance to freely change their religion, the overwhelming majority—even those who are not necessarily in favor of the Islamic Republic—would remain Shiite Muslims.

Following the Muslim invasion, Iranian culture did not end, nor did it allow itself to be silenced, as Abdolhossein Zarrinkoob implied in his *Two Centuries of Silence*. It changed, adapted, gestated with the opportunities invasion brought, and then bloomed into an impressive civilization that forever left its mark on Islam. This blossoming of post-conquest Persian culture, as the more astute scholars of Iran and Islam have realized, could not be due to some inherent racial superiority of Persians over other Muslims. A mingling of cultures took hold that enriched everyone involved, creating a united people that Islam had brought together and allowed to blend. Similarly, the idea that the Arab conquest awoke an Iranian racial resentment, which in turn manifested itself in an impressive Iranian contribution to Muslim civilization, is also nonsensical. In the words of the Scottish scholar of Islam, Sir Hamilton A. R. Gibb (1895-1971):

The view ... that the richer developments of Muslim culture and religious thought or of Arabic literature were due to the Iranians and represent aspects of an "Aryan reaction against Semitic ideas" is an over-generalization from certain special cases. In Persia even at that time there could be as little question of racial purity as of a specifically "Aryan" culture. Except for the secretarial translations ... [Persia's] contributions were not literary, scientific, or philosophical, but the artistic temperament and natural genius and power of assimilation of her people, that found their finest expression under the stimulus of Islam.¹⁹





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Gibb slightly underestimates Iran's literary, scientific, and philosophical contributions, but he nails the reasons for Iranians' disproportionately important role in building classical Muslim civilization. He is especially right in dismissing crude fantasies of racial superiority as any kind of factor in the Persian people's cultural contributions, as many of his contemporaries did—and too many Iranians still do.

There is no doubt that Iranian society experienced years of harm, misery and mayhem as a direct result of the Arab invasion. However, there is also no doubt that within a century of their defeat, Iranians gained an almost complete monopoly over the administration of the Muslim empire, and dominated Islam's civilization. In the words of Ignác Goldziher (1850-1921):

Politically, the Abbasid [Caliphs] relied mainly on the non-Arab nationalities, chiefly the Persians, to whom important tasks were now assigned, not only in formal matters but also in leading administrative posts. The caliphs chose their counselors from among the descendants of old Persian families; moreover, they divested themselves of the caliph's hitherto Arab character and, regarding themselves as the successors of the Sassanid king, and not of Arab sheikhs, assumed the imperial attributes of the former. They even transferred their residence from ancient Damascus, on the border of the Arabian desert, to ancient Persian soil: first to Kufa, then to Anbār, and finally, in 762-3, to the immediate vicinity of the old Persian royal residence of Ctesiphon, where the new capital of Baghdad was founded.²⁰

Persian influence upon Islam's civilization during the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258) was so profound that the Arab author al-Jāhiz (c. 776-868) referred to the government of the Abbasids as “an Iranian administration”.²¹ However, there is plenty of reason to believe that Iran's cultural influence was felt even during the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750). For instance, Iyās ibn Mu'āwiyah (d. 740), reports that he was summoned by 'Umar ibn Hubairah, the Umayyad governor of Iraq to be interviewed for some office. One of the questions that 'Umar asked him was: “Do you know anything about the days of [i.e., history of] the Persians?” When he responded that he was most knowledgeable about it, he was given the job.²² A few centuries later, the great North African historian, Ibn Khaldun—who was born in Tunisia in 1332 and died in Cairo in 1406—explained the cultural influence of Persians on the development of the Islamic civilization:





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It is a remarkable fact that, with few exceptions, most Muslim scholars both in the religious and in the intellectual sciences have been non-Arabs. When a scholar is of Arab origin, he is non-Arab in language and upbringing and has non-Arab teachers. This is so in spite of the fact that Islam is an Arabic religion, and its founder was an Arab.

The reason for it is that at the beginning Islam had no sciences or crafts. That was due to the simple conditions (that prevailed) and the desert attitude. The religious laws, which are the commands and prohibitions of God, were in the breasts of the authorities. They knew their sources, the Koran and the Sunnah, from information they had received directly from the lawgiver himself and from the men around him. The people at that time were Arabs. They did not know anything about scientific instruction or the writing of books and systematic works. There was no incentive or need for that. This was the situation during the time of the men around Mohammad and the men of the second generation. ... We have mentioned before that the crafts are cultivated by sedentary people and that of all peoples the Arab (Bedouins) are least familiar with the crafts. Thus, the sciences came to belong to sedentary culture, and the Arabs were not familiar with them or with their cultivation. Now, the (only) sedentary people at that time were non-Arabs ... They were most versed in those things, because sedentary culture had been firmly rooted among them from the time of the Persian Empire.

Thus, the founders of grammar were Sibawayh and, after him, al-Fārisi and az-Zajjāj. All of them were of non-Arab (Persian) descent. They were brought up in the Arabic language and acquired the knowledge of it through their upbringing and through contact with Arabs. They invented the rules of (grammar) and made (grammar) into a discipline (in its own right) for later (generations to use.) Most of the hadith [prophetic traditions] scholars who preserved traditions for the Muslims also were non-Arabs (Persians), or Persian in language and upbringing, because the discipline was widely cultivated in the Iraq and the regions beyond. (Furthermore,) all the scholars who worked in the science of the principles of jurisprudence were non-Arabs (Persians), as is well known. The same applies to speculative theologians and to most [Koran] commentators. Only the non-Arabs (Persians) engaged in the task of preserving knowledge and writing systematic scholarly works. Thus, the truth of the following statement by the Prophet becomes apparent: "If scholarship hung suspended at the highest parts of heaven, the Persians [lit: people of Fārs] would reach it and take it."²³

I can fill the pages of this book with such testimonials from classical





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Arabic sources. But my aim is not to feed the raging fires of my countrymen's ethnocentrism. Instead, I want to say this: to the extent that Islam is both a religion and a civilization, we Persians have been instrumental in the development of both. Therefore, the childish anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiments expressed by many Iranians, amounts to shooting ourselves in the foot. Much of the so-called "Islamic" arts, philosophy, theology, science, and not a small part of Arabic language and literature were developed by us; and our contribution was born of the interaction between Iran and Islam. This relationship nurtured the flowering of Persian creativity and intellectual potential that had laid dormant under the suffocating weight of pre-Islamic Iranian institutions—both the corrupt Sassanid caste system and intrusive Zoroastrian religious prohibitions.

Too many Iranians disregard the evidence of historical sources, and cling to a picture of pre-Islamic Persia that is half romantic nonsense and half sheer error. They consider the Muslim conquest an irreparable cultural calamity. Almost in the same breath, they all tend to boast of the "Persian genius" of such Muslim luminaries as Avicenna, Rāzi, Omar Khayyam, and many others as proof that, without this "genius," Muslim civilization would not have amounted to much. That's only partly accurate. Without the Muslim conquest, their beloved "Persian genius" would never have been unfettered to achieve all of its impressive accomplishments.

Never forget that the concept of "genius" alone does not explain the vast number of Iranians who excelled in Islamic theology and in Arabic language and literature. In other words, the Persian contributions of which we Iranians are so boastful, was fueled also by Muslim piety and love of the Arabic language. Let me hint at an argument that I will develop more systematically in the next chapter, namely that the cultural context of early classical Persian literature—to which Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* belongs—did not promote hostility to Arabic or Islamic culture. The sentiment is a relatively recent development, exaggerated by some members of Persian middle and upper middle classes—especially those who reside in the West. But let me conclude this chapter by making, and also repeating, a few final observations for the sake of emphasis.

The implications of Muslim civilization's Persian shift, an event which





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Richard Frye has aptly dubbed: “The Persian Conquest of Islam,”²⁴ have been major, not only for Islam in general, but also for Arabic language and literature. As the eminent English orientalist and Rumi scholar, Reynold A. Nicholson (1868-1945) put it:

The first thing that strikes the student of medieval Arabic literature is the fact that a very large proportion of the leading writers are non-Arabs, or at best semi-Arabs, men whose fathers or mothers were of foreign, and especially Persian race.²⁵

Most Iranians carry around a mental image of the Arab invasion which is colored by racist notions, imported from Europe. Indeed, most of them know very little about the real conquest's timeline. Instead, they are consumed with the pain of an imaginary invasion. This imaginary Arab invasion is a fictitious incursion, which has been sustained by a concoction of half-truths and insinuations of abuse that make many Persians hate their Muslim selves in their Arab neighbors. The anti-Muslim and anti-Arab prejudice of many Persians—especially those who reside in the west—forces some of them to consciously avoid Arabic words in their writing and speech. These misguided *literati* speak and write in such a tortured concoction of classical Persian and made-up vocabulary that Iran's greatest classical authors—if they could experience it—would find it both painful and incomprehensible. Those Iranians who consciously avoid the wonderful vocabulary of literary Persian, with its rich reservoir of Arabic loan-words, have bought into the dangerous Western myth of “purity,” and want to use an “unalloyed” form of Persian. They believe this is a variety of Persian that is completely devoid of “Semitic” elements. This is bizarre. Imagine what Americans would sound like if they chose to speak using only “pure” Anglo-Saxon-derived English words: incomprehensible pre-medieval hillbillies.

Throughout her long history, Iran's official languages have always had a vast number of loan-words; and have always been richer for them. The Middle Persian of the Sassanid period—the so-called *Pahlavi* language—was entirely written in a Semitic alphabet (i.e., in a derivative of the Imperial Aramaic), and was full of foreign words. These were chiefly Semitic words that were written in their original Aramaic spelling, but were pronounced as though they were Persian words. They were treated not





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only as words but as symbols. Let me give you an example of a similar situation in modern English, which although not quite the same, helps clarify the situation. The English language uses certain written symbols, which stand for something that is pronounced differently than their actual spelling. For instance, the word “pound” in its sense of unit of weight, is written as *Lb.* in English. However, no red-blooded American would pronounce it as “lb.” The sequence of letters *L* and *B* with a period after them, is pronounced “pound” in American English.

Middle Persian had a similar situation except on a much more extensive scale. It had many nouns, verbs, pronouns, and prepositions, which were written in Aramaic, but were pronounced in Persian. These were called *hozwareš* (pronounced: *hoz wah resh*). For example, the Middle Persian word for king was pronounced *shāh*. However, it was written in Aramaic as *MLK*, i.e. *malkā*, which is a cognate of Arabic *malik*. Similarly, the word for brother, Middle Persian *brād* was written *AH*, i.e., *akh*, whose similarity to the Arabic *akh*, “brother” is obvious. The same may be said of Middle Persian verbs such as: *YMYTWNtn*, which was pronounced *mordan*, “to die,” etc.

In view of these facts, what most “purist” Iranians fail to understand is that their reaction to what they believe happened during the Muslim invasion is a clumsy path to cultural suicide. Such attempts at achieving “purity” do not make them astute, modern, or even Western—regardless of how badly they may want to be one or the other. It only turns them into caricatures of themselves, and transforms them into a people without a past.

The popular narrative of Iran’s conquest by Islam is a dangerous and deceptive story that damages and obscures our history. Let me end this chapter by citing an astute insightful observation that Susan Jacoby quotes from the American historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (1917-2007):

In an astute essay on the ways in which contemporary preoccupations influence every historian’s assessment of the past, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., observes that it is impossible to “put a coin in a slot and have history come out. For the past is a chaos of events and personalities into which we cannot penetrate. It is beyond retrieval and it is beyond reconstruction. All historians know this in their souls. He adds that “conceptions of the past are far from stable,” and that when “new urgencies arise in our own times and lives, the historian’s





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spotlight shifts, probing now into the shadows, throwing into sharp relief things that were always there but that earlier historians had carelessly excised from the collective memory." ("History and National Stupidity," in *New York Review of Books*, April 27, 2006.)²⁶

The contra-factual narrative that claims Ferdowsi intentionally wrote his poem in pure Persian as a resentful reaction to the cultural and linguistic changes that took place after the Arab conquest turns history on its head. Like all great works of art, Ferdowsi's masterwork reflects and transcends the time, place and circumstances of its origin. As we shall see in our discussion of his life and character, there is no basis to view our national poet as a cultural rejectionist who wanted to repudiate his country for a fantasized past that ended hundreds of years before his time. In the next chapter, we will search out the facts about the literary and cultural background of Ferdowsi's era. The chapter will deal with the evolution of our country's language and the rise of classical Persian literature: these form the true literary and cultural backgrounds of Iran's national epic.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Roland G. Kent. *Old Persian: Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*. (2nd revised ed. New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1953), p.119.
- 2 The photographs are taken from the site called: *Information Base of Chemical Weapons Victims* at: <http://www.chemical-victims.com/HomePage.aspx?TabID=0&Site=chemical&Lang=fa-IR>. These are villagers in an Iranian village called *Sardasht*, near the border with Iraq. The chemical bombardment of *Sardasht* took place on June 28, 1987, seven months before the chemical attack on the Kurdish city of *Halabja* in March 16, 1988. It was the West's disregard of Iran's complaints about these attacks that emboldened Saddam Hossein to unleash them against the Iraqi Kurds. Iranians were the first victims of Saddam's attempted genocide and the world's collaborative silence. See: <http://www.chemical-victims.com/DesktopModules/News/NewsView.aspx?TabID=0&Site=chemical&Lang=fa-IR&ItemID=28078&mid=12546&wVersion=Staging>.
- 3 See his website: <http://www.rezaee.ir/fa/pages/?cid=5034>.
- 4 In a recent novel, entitled *Banquo's Ghosts*, Rich Lowry, the young editor of the *National Review*, whose erotic musings concerning governor Palin may be found amid the poppycock that passes for political discourse in this country, indulges this paranoid fancy by concocting a scenario according to which a rogue CIA agent dispatches an operative into Iran to assassinate an Iranian scientist who is on the verge of developing nuclear weapons (See the product description and reviews of the book by various conservative pundits at: http://www.amazon.com/Banquos-Ghosts-Richard-Lowry/dp/1593155085/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1239312122&sr=1-1. This is the same man who in an erotic daydream concerning governor Palin's famous winks during the Presidential campaign of 2008 wrote "...





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I'm sure I'm not the only male in America who, when Palin dropped her first wink, sat up a little straighter on the couch and said, "Hey, I think she just winked at me." And her smile. By the end, when she clearly knew she was doing well, it was so sparkling it was almost mesmerizing. It sent little starbursts through the screen and ricocheting around the living rooms of America. This is a quality that can't be learned; it's either something you have or you don't, and man, she's got it." It is hard not to imagine William F. Buckley Jr. rolling in his grave as his protégé's adolescent imaginings. See: <http://corner.nationalreview.com/post/?q=NDYzMGFiNjQ0MW RjNmI0ZTlkYjgwZTEzMjA3MWNiZTk>. Fantastic as Lowery's scenario sounds, it is not as far fetched or as puerile as it may appear to civilized people. Efforts to undermine Iran in every way have long been afoot. According to those who hoard thousands of nuclear warheads, we, this irritating race of mongrels created from the mixing of Persians, Turkish, and Arab blood, are not entitled to nuclear power, the science of physics, or, for that matter, to physicists of our own. *The Copenhagen Post online* reported on Tuesday, 17 February 2009 that the Danish national intelligence agency PET had requested the country's universities to provide information about their Iranian students engaged in such courses of study that could "contribute to Iran's sensitive activities—especially, the country's development of nuclear weapons." See <http://www.cphpost.dk/news/national/88-national/44793-ministry-demands-answers-from>. Seymour M. Hersh reported in the *New Yorker* (July 7, 2008) that the CIA and the Joint Special Operation Command (JSOC) have been conducting missions inside Iran, which involve capturing or killing Iranian "high-value targets." Suggesting that nuclear scientist might be among these "high-value targets" does not require a leap of the imagination.

- 5 James Darmesteter, "Race and Tradition," in *Selected Essays of James Darmesteter*. Translated by Helen B. Jastrow and edited by Morris Jastrow Jr. (reprint, New York: Books for Libraries Press), p.156. This collection of essays was originally published in 1895.

- 6 Professor Safa's observations are typical of many other Iranian scholars:

ذبیح الله صفا، حماسه سرائی در ایران (چاپ چهارم، تهران: امیرکبیر، ۱۳۶۳)، صص ۱۵۹-۱۳۹ و مخصوصاً عباراتی مانند: "با نفوذ اعراب و تسلط پیاپی ترکان و غارتها و کشتارهای بی امان که در ایران صورت گرفت و بلیایی که بر مردم این کشور رسید و اختلاطی عجیب که در نژادهای مختلف (ترک- تازی- ایرانی) پدید آمد" (ص ۱۵۷).

- 7 سعید نفیسی. "تاریخ فساد زبان ما،" مقالات سعید نفیسی در زمینه زبان و ادب فارسی، به کوشش محمد رسول دریگشت (تهران: بنیاد موقوفات دکتر محمود افشار، ۱۳۸۶)، ص ۱۱.

- 8 For a more detailed account of the conquest of Iran and the murder of Yazdgerd III see: Parvaneh Pourshariati. *Decline and Fall of the Sassanid Empire: The Sassanid-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), pp.219-287; and for a brief account of the emperor's descendants see Touraj Daryae. *Sassanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), pp.37-39; *Sassanian Iran: Portrait of a Late Antique Empire* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2008), pp.95-104. Detailed Persian accounts of the event may be found in:

حسن تقی زاده. از پرویز تاجنگیز (تهران: فروغی، ۱۳۴۹)، صص ۲۰۲-۱۷۸؛ برتولد اشپولر، تاریخ ایران در قرون نخستین اسلامی، جلد ۲، ترجمه جواد فلاطوری (چاپ چهارم، تهران: شرکت انتشارات علمی و فرهنگی، ۱۳۷۳)، ج ۱، صص ۳۰-۵؛ عباس اقبال آشتیانی، تاریخ مفصل ایران از صدر اسلام تا انقراض قاجاریه. به کوشش محمد دبیرسیاقی (تهران: خیام، ۱۳۴۶)، صص ۶۰-۴۷.

- 9 آرتور کریستنسن. ایران در زمان ساسانیان. ترجمه رشید یاسمی، ویراستار: حسن رضائی باغ ببیدی (چاپ دوم، تهران: صدای معاصر، ۱۳۸۰)، صص ۳۶۴-۳۶۳؛ در باره اختلاف نظرهایی که در مورد حقیقت ازدواج شهربانو با حضرت سید الشهداء وجود دارد و اثبات واقعیت تاریخی این مطلب نگاه کنید به: احمد مهدوی دامغانی. شاهدخت و الاhtar شهربانو (تهران: میراث مکتوب، ۱۳۸۸)، ضمیمه شماره ۱۶ آئینه میراث).





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- 10 "... و اولاد ماهویه الی الساعة یسمون بمرو و نواحیها خداه کشان." نگاه کنید به: حمزة بن الحسن الاصفهانی. کتاب تاریخ سنی ملوک الارض و الانبیاء. به تصحیح سید جواد ایرانی (برلین: مطبعه کایانی، ۱۳۴۰ قمری)، ص ۴۳.
- 11 Richard N. Frye. *The Heritage of Persia* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1963), p.229.
- 12 نگاه کنید به تقی زاده، از پرویز تاجنگیز، صص ۱۸۲.
- 13 Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, pp.230-232.
- 14 محمد محمدی ملایری. تاریخ و فرهنگ ایران در دوران انتقال از عصر ساسانی به عصر اسلامی، ۶ مجلد (چاپ دوم، تهران: توس، ۱۳۷۹)، ج ۱ صص ۳۱۱-۳۱۴.
- 15 برتولد اشپولر، تاریخ ایران، ج ۱، صص ۱۲-۱۳.
- 16 تقی زاده، از پرویز تاجنگیز، ص ۱۹۷. نیز نگاه کنید به گزارش مسکویه رازی (۳۲۰-۴۲۱ ق): ابوعلی مسکویه رازی. تجارب الامم، ترجمه دکتر ابوالقاسم امامی (تهران: سروش، ۱۳۶۹)، ج ۱، صص ۳۴۰-۳۴۲.
- 17 حسن بن محمد بن حسن قمی (قرن چهارم هجری). تاریخ قم ترجمه حسن بن علی بن حسن بن عبدالملک قمی. به تصحیح جلال الدین طهرانی، (چاپ دوم، تهران: توس، ۱۳۶۱)، صص ۲۹۷-۲۹۸.
- 18 مثلاً نگاه کنید به تجارب الامم (ترجمه فارسی)، ج ۱، صص ۳۶۰-۳۶۴؛ و نیز به تاریخنامه طبری. گردانده منسوب به بلعمی، از کهن ترین متون فارسی، بخش چاپ نشده. به تصحیح و تحشیه محمد روشن. ۳ مجلد (چاپ سوم، تهران: نشر البرز، ۱۳۷۳)، ج ۱ صص ۵۱۵-۵۳۴.
- 19 Sir Hamilton A. R. Gibb. *Arabic Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp.48-49. Gibb also refers to the confrontation of the Islamic society by Persians and Aramean cultures that stimulated "both by attraction and repulsion." p. 60.
- 20 Ignáce Goldziher. *A Short History of Classical Arabic Literature*, translated, revised, and enlarged by Joseph Desomogyi (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1966), pp.39-40. Goldziher wrote this book in 1908 in Hungarian. During the first years of the World War II, his last pupil, Joseph Desomogyi, translated it into English from Hungarian, and in the process, enlarged the text considerably.
- 21 عمر بن البحر الجاحظ. البیان و التنبین، به تصحیح محمد عبدالسلام هارون، ۴ مجلد در دو جلد (طبع پنجم، قاهره: الخانجی، ۱۹۸۵)، ج ۳، ص ۳۶۶: "و لو أن دولتهم [یعنی دولت آل عباس] عجمیة خراسانیة".
- 22 ابو محمد عبدالله بن مسلم بن قتیبة الدینوری. عیون الاخبار، ۴ مجلد در دو جلد (قاهره: دارالکتب، ۱۹۶۳)، ج ۱، ص ۱۸: "حدثنی سهل بن محمد قال حدثنا الأصمعی قال حدثنی صالح بن رستم أبو عامر الخزاز قال: قال لی إیاس بن معاوية المزنی: أرسل إلی عمر بن هبيرة فأتیتُهُ فساکتني فسکت فلما أطلت قال: ایہ. قلت: سل عما بدا لک. قال أنقرأ القرآن؟ قلت نعم. قال: هل تفرض الفرائض؟ قلت نعم. قال فهل تعرف من أيام العرب شيئاً؟ قلت نعم. قال فهل تعرف من أيام العجم شيئاً؟ قلت أنا بها أعلم. قال: إني أريد أن أستعين بک. ... قال فولانی [و أعطانی] ألفی درهم فهما أول مال عوّلتہ."
- 23 Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, 3 volumes, translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), vol.3, pp.311-313.
- 24 Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, pp.224-244.
- 25 Reynold A. Nicholson. *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), pp.276-277; Cf. Gibb, *Arabic Literature*, p.51.
- 26 Susan Jacoby. *The Age of American Unreason* (NY: Pantheon Books, 2008), pp.180-181.





Chapter 5



Hiding in Plain View: Persian Language and the Arab Invasion

New Persian, like all Iranian idioms, derives from the Indo-European language group, which—as its name implies—stretches from India through Iran, to continental Europe.¹ The relationship among these languages can be determined by similarities in their primary vocabulary—words that have to do with the family, numbers, basic natural phenomena, and other building-blocks of human consciousness. Compare the Persian, English, and German cognates that are presented in the following table with words of the same meaning in Arabic and Hebrew, which are *not* Indo-European languages. Notice that in Persian, English, and German, these words are quite similar, while they differ markedly from the same words in Arabic and Hebrew. By the same token, the words in Arabic and Hebrew are from the Semitic language group, and show their common ancestry.

English	Persian	German	Arabic	Hebrew
Mother	<i>Mādar</i>	<i>Mutter</i>	<i>Umm</i>	<i>Ima</i>
Father	<i>Pedar</i>	<i>Vater</i>	<i>Ab</i>	<i>Aba</i>
Brother	<i>Barādar</i>	<i>Bruder</i>	<i>Akh</i>	<i>Akh</i>
To grab	<i>Gereftan</i>	<i>Grapschen</i> ²	<i>Akhdha-</i>	<i>'Akhaz</i>





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These divisions are purely linguistic. They have nothing to do with race. No grand theories of ethnic affiliation can be conjured from the fact that Iranians speak an Indo-European language and most of their neighbors don't. All the mendacious posturing about Iranians being "Aryans," and other racist nonsense systematically promoted by the old Pahlavi regime in Iranian schools, was aimed at building a bizarre master-race fantasy out of a simple linguistic fact.

Despite Persian's Indo-European origins, it is written in the Arabic alphabet, a Semitic writing system. This is no recent development. As unlettered invaders, Iranian tribes who entered the Middle East *had* no writing system of their own. When they finally created their empire by military might, they were forced to adopt the existing writing systems of the great Semitic civilizations that bordered their realm. Illiteracy is okay for managing the affairs of wandering tribesmen, but administering an empire requires a writing system for order and documentation. Thus, even the cuneiform writing of the Old Persian inscriptions of Darius (r. 522-486 B.C.) and other Achaemenid rulers was based on the cuneiform syllabary³ of the Akkadian Semites.⁴ The same is true of the Avestan, and Middle Persian alphabets, which were also derived from a form of Aramaic with some Greek influences. All this adds up to the fact that any desire on the part of Iranian closet-Nazis to do away with Semitic Arabic script, so that Persian can be somehow rendered in a "purely Iranian alphabet" is absurd. If nothing else, the only likely alphabets, Pahlavi and Avestan, are *both* also Semitic systems of writing. Indeed, even the English alphabet is distantly derived from Phoenician, which is a Semitic language of Canaanite variety.⁵

Of course, Persian is not the only Indo-European language that uses a Semitic alphabet. For instance, Yiddish, a form of Middle High German used by the Ashkenazi Jews, is written in Hebrew, while Mozarabic, a Romance language spoken in medieval Spain, was written in Arabic letters. Keeping this background in mind, let's look into the story of New Persian at the time of Iran's Arab invasion, and the state of this language during Ferdowsi's lifetime.

First things first: the term New Persian is misleading; it gives the wrong impression about our language. When they see that word "New,"





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most non-specialists think this Persian language may be the same vintage as, say, modern English, which dates from roughly the 16th century. This is not the case. The name New Persian merely distinguishes the latest form of our thousand year old language from two earlier ancestors of it, namely Middle Persian and Old Persian. Broadly speaking, Old Persian dates back to the Achaemenid empire (559-330 B.C.), and Middle Persian was used during most of the Sassanid dynasty's Iranian rule (224-651). So "New" in "New Persian" refers to a 1,300 year epoch of historic change and linguistic consistency. Not really *new*—more like *immutable*.

Persian is quite unlike European languages. They have changed so drastically in the past millennium that their earlier forms are no longer intelligible to speakers of their modern derivatives. Persian has changed very little. Iranians with no more than a descent high school education can easily understand Ferdowsi's words, and the words of other classical Persian authors who lived in the 9th and 10th centuries A.D. This is because the overwhelming majority of these words are still in use under generally similar grammatical rules, and with very little change in pronunciation. For instance, a well-known ode by the poet, Rudaki (c. 858-940) was set to music and performed by two modern singers, Banān (1911-1985) and Marziyeh (1924-2010) in a popular music program on Iranian National Radio in 1961. Historians could look into the ode's references and deduce that it was about 1,020 years old; the song's many fans could understand and enjoy every word, in any case.

The fact that Persians can access and appreciate a millennium of literature with relative ease has two important implications. First, it speaks to the remarkable conservatism and continuity of Persian culture. Second, it reveals the long reach of our past and the chain of memory that connects the Persian heart to the words of artists who lived a millennium ago. Modern Europeans cannot understand thousand year old poetry from their country without highly specialized training—learning what has essentially become a foreign language. Let's clarify this by an example which helps us compare Persian's conservatism with the constantly changing idiom of English.

In the summer of 991, some sixty years after the poet Rudaki composed the ode which became a popular song hit over a thousand years





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later, a group of Viking raiding vessels sailed up the Blackwater river to the island of Northey, near Maldon in the county of Essex. Byrhtnoth, the chief officer of the district, led an Anglo-Saxon force that tried to beat the Vikings back; he was killed, and his force defeated in what became known as the Battle of Maldon. An Old English poem of the same name recounts this event as heroic tragedy.⁶ Here's an extract from that poem's last few lines:

*Byrhtpold mæpelode, bord hafenode—
se pæs ealde zeneat—æsc acpehte;
he ful baldlice beornas lærde:
'Hize sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mæzen lytlað.'*⁷

Byhtwold spoke; he grasped his shield—
he was an old follower—he shook the ash spear;
very boldly he exhorted the warriors:
'Courage shall be the fiercer, heart the bolder,
Spirit the greater, as our strength lessens.'⁸

These verses, celebrating a defeat that took place while Ferdowsi was finishing up his first redaction of the *Shāhnāme* in 994, are not intelligible to any speakers of modern English.

English has changed so much that even Middle English, the form of the language which was used until the late 15th century, is not easily intelligible today. Try making sense of the following passage, taken from *Ancrene Riwe* ('The Rule for Anchoresses'):

*Uikelares beoð þreo kunnes. þe uorme beoð vuele inouh, þe oðre
þauh beoð wurse, þe þridde zet beoð alrewurste. þe uorme, zif a
mon is god, preiseð hine biuoren himself, and makeð hine, inouh
reðe, zet betere þen he beo, and zif he seið wel oðer deð wel he hit
heueð to heie up mid ouerpresunge and herunge.*

Flatterers are three in kind. The first are bad enough; the second, however, are worse; the third are yet worst of all. The first, if a man is good, praises





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him to his face and, eagerly enough, makes him out to be even better than he is, and if he says well or does well he makes too much of it with excessive praise and glorification.⁹

As you can see from these two examples, even an elementary understanding Old and Middle English requires special training.

In nearly complete contrast, the Persian language of Ferdowsi's era remains substantially the same literary language that we use today. Moreover, many contemporary Persian poets continue to produce verse that is virtually indistinguishable in style and language from the verse of Iran's classical past. This has important implications for the study of classical Persian poetry, because many scholars of classical Persian are also fine poets, who compose works in a continuum of the classical style. So the lines between modern and ancient in New Persian are nowhere near as sharply drawn as in western language. Scholars of medieval European literatures work with dead languages. Iranian students of classical Persian material from the same era engage with a living language in which they have native fluency. This means that these scholars' esthetic judgments about their subject are sharpened and reinforced by a linguistic and cultural immersion that they have not so much *learned* as *known*, beginning with the sounds they absorbed in their mothers' bosoms. Scholars of Medieval European literatures are stuck with parsing dead languages and cultures. That's why I pointed out how the term New Persian is misleading. In the first place, this language—in use since the time of Old English—cannot really be “new”. Yet this language cannot really be called “old” either because contemporary poets such as Bahār (1884-1951), Foruzānfār (1904-1970), Homa'i (1900-1980), Adib-e Borumand (1924–), Shafii-Kadkani (1939–) and others continue to produce new verse in it. This important fact—that Ferdowsi's language lives as a vital component of contemporary Iranian thought—has major implications for non-Western *Shāhnāme* scholarship.

I. Arabic and Persian: Conflict or Reciprocity?

The most widespread public misunderstanding about the *Shāhnāme*'s historical context is a notion that the Arab invasion of Iran all but killed Persian as a language. According to this fable, several





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centuries passed before Ferdowsi revived it with his great poem. Those pushing this fable also contend that Arabic—the Muslim conqueror's language—threatened to overcome Persian in Iranian society and culture. This would mean that Persian language and literature were silenced for over two hundred years.

The apocryphal theory that Arabic somehow overcame Iran's native tongue is not just a mistake that everyday people stumbled into from watching too much TV. Established academics have also drunk the Kool-Aid. Most prominent was probably Professor Abdolhossein Zarrinkoob (1923-1999), a widely-published twentieth century scholar of Persian literature and criticism who taught at Tehran University for many years. Professor Zarrinkoob wrote a celebrated and influential book on the linguistic subjugation of Persian. It first appeared under the suggestive title *Two Centuries of Silence*, in 1951. The book has proven remarkably popular for an academic work. It is still in print; in fact its 21st printing was published in Tehran recently.¹⁰ Zarrinkoob argues that post-invasion social and political circumstances led to the temporary defeat of Persian language and culture, to the point that Iranians forgot their own language and writing:

An incessant and terrifying silence cast its shadow over Iran's history and language for two centuries. Nothing but brief and fearful cries broke the silence throughout this time. ... From the outset the Arabs, perhaps wanting to protect themselves against Iran's languages, which they saw as a weapon in the hands of the vanquished, set out to destroy all the languages and dialects that prevailed in Iran. There was, after all, the fear that these languages might help the population rebel against them and endanger their dominance over the vast expanses of the country.¹¹

Professor Zarrinkoob states this theory in stylish, highly dramatic Persian. Unfortunately, his scenario makes no sense at all. Nothing in the actual history of Persian language and culture following the Muslim conquest points to a systematic Arabic effort to suppress Iran's language or culture. Nonetheless, this notion, so artfully expressed by Zarrinkoob and others, remains an article of faith among educated Iranians. But why is this legend of defeat, destruction and ultimate redemption taken as historical fact?





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There is a major problem with Professor Zarrinkoob's argument: military defeat and political subjugation do not cause wholesale linguistic change. At worst, they may lead to a form of diglossia, the use of two or more variants of language, where the defeated population may use parts of the conquerors' language to communicate with the occupying officialdom, while conducting day-to-day business in its own language. Consider the situation of the diverse peoples who came under the control of the Soviet Union. In spite of the Soviets' active promotion of the Russian language, these peoples ended up maintaining their native tongues in daily routines. Russian was used largely as an official language alongside the native idiom in most of these areas. As soon as the Soviet control fell apart, many of these subjugated peoples, notably the Tajiks who speak a form of Persian, largely reverted to their native tongue, even for conducting official business. They insist on it, despite all the practical difficulties a major transition like that entails. In any case, there is no historical proof that Arabs attempted to systematically undermine Iran's language and culture for political reasons.

Staying on the less dramatic, but more sober side of the looking glass, the implications of the Persian language's conservatism means several things. That the post-conquest Iranian population did not wake up one morning speaking, writing, and thinking in Arabic. Nor were they forced to gradually adopt the language and customs of the invaders for their day-to-day life. The evidence of primary sources—painstakingly parsed by a number of eminent scholars—shows that linguistic change *did* take place. However, the change involved *not* Iranians being "Arabized," but Arabs—like Alexander the Great long before them—becoming "Persianized."¹² Professor Mohammad Mohammadi, the undisputed authority on the era's social history, puts it like this:

With regard to the question of the propagation of Arabic, as the language of the conquerors, in Iran, I have already pointed out that not only such an event did not take place, but what happened was precisely the opposite of this process. Arab tribes, clans, and populations that had migrated to various parts of Iran gradually lost their language and cultural identity, and were absorbed in Iran's Persian speaking society.¹³





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Persians and Arabs knew each other well, long before the advent of Islam. Iran had garrisons in Yemen and a close relationship with numerous Arab tribes and states that were allies of the Sassanids against Persia's Roman rivals. There was a lot more cultural contact and give and take between Iran and the Arab lands prior to the Muslim conquest than is commonly acknowledged. For instance, one of the Sassanid governors who ruled over the four grand divisions of the empire bore the title Commander of the South (*nimruz espahbod*). All of the Arabian Peninsula, including Yemen, fell within this governor's administrative area. This commander appointed his own officials to manage the various subdivisions of the huge area assigned to him. Sixteen names of these regional governors (*marzbāns*) have been preserved in an historical chronicle written by Hamza of Esfahān (893-961). Some of these commanders had married into Arab aristocracies of their areas, and others had learned Arabic. Similarly, many of the Arabs who were associated with these governors had learned Persian. We know from this fact and others that Persian language and culture had penetrated Arab lands long before Muslims began the series of wars that ended in Iran's conquest.¹⁴

As I pointed out before, some of the local Persian governors and administrators had already intermarried with aristocratic Arab families and had produced a bilingual, and bicultural, generation of upper class Perso-Arab children. Furthermore, large Arab populations had already migrated into Iran during the rule of Khosrow I (531-579), and had mixed with the local Iranian inhabitants. Given the considerable pre-Islamic cultural and linguistic contact between Persia and her Arab neighbors, the conceit that Persian language and culture may be divided into pre-Islamic and post-Islamic varieties, and the ancillary notion that these varieties are separated by the wall of Muslim invasion, is mere fantasy.¹⁵

Persia's civilization was known and admired by pre-Islamic Arabs. Most did not view it with animosity. Many had learned Persian for the same reasons that many in the Third World learn English or other western languages today. The Arab conquerors were pragmatic in their dealings with subject peoples. Following their victory in Iran, they quickly adopted the administrative machinery of the Sassanid Empire to manage their vast new holdings. There was no other practical way to administer





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an empire of that size and complexity.

Adopting Iran's old administrative structure meant that the Muslims had to maintain Persia's two important bureaucratic classes. These were the *dehqāns*—the provincial gentry in charge of tax collection—and the *dabirs*—chancery officials and scribes. The practical consequence of this policy was the perpetuation of Iran's elite culture, represented by these two groups. Thus, a great deal of pre-Islamic Iranian customs such as annual New Year and Autumn celebrations (i.e., *Noruz* and *Mehrgān* festivals) survived alongside the old administrative policies. They had become part of the ceremonies of Caliphs' courts, through the Persian officials who were employed there. The emulation of pre-Islamic Iranian administrative and cultural traditions by the Arabs took place early in the empire's history. For instance, under the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750) the seven ranks of the Sassanid army were adopted into the Umayyad army, which also followed the standards established by the Sassanid military and did not promote any soldier to a superior rank before he had first served in all the inferior ranks.¹⁶

All this had significant linguistic outcomes. Many Persians, especially those who had converted to Islam and had risen to prominent positions, as well as Persian officials who had stayed with the old religion but were in close daily contact with the Arab rulers, had of necessity become bilingual. They used Persian in the secular sphere of their lives and Arabic in religious and official realms. This group of Iranians who, as we said before, also embodied the culture of Iran's pre-Islamic elite, were quite influential in the new government and among the new aristocracy. Moreover, the number of Muslim aristocrats whose mothers were Persian, and who knew the language as their mother-tongue, was on the increase. These two groups significantly contributed to the perpetuation of pre-Islamic Iran's elite culture, and to the infusion of elite Muslim culture with Iranian elements. Meanwhile, the changes that occurred among Iran's general population had their own dynamics. A sizable number of Iranians converted to Islam within a relatively short time after the conquest. However, this group's conversion was a spiritual issue and had no significant impact upon their language or cultural traditions. Islam and Christianity are universal religions—they have no ethnic or racial dimen-





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sions, and do not require converts to also change their ethnic identification. In that respect, they are quite different from Judaism and Zoroastrianism, which have an ethnic component, and so have never functioned as universal religions.

The linguistic and cultural impact of Iranian converts upon Arabic and Islamic thinking was quite far-reaching. Most importantly, Persian Muslims played a major role in systematizing and developing Arabic grammar. Iranians had found Arabic, the sacred language of their new faith, indispensable and yet alien. The new converts had to learn Arabic; and in order to learn the language efficiently, they had to develop the tools that could systematically allow them to do so.

Some Persians today wax positively poetic with praise for their ancestors' contributions to Arabic linguistics. However, the fact that most early Muslim grammarians who systematized the Arabic language were Persians has nothing to do with Persian intellectual superiority over anyone else: as non-native speakers of Arabic, they had to depend on grammatical rules for learning the language. So, as a matter of sheer practicality, they proceeded to develop rules in order to facilitate the process of understanding Arabic's grammatical and linguistic components. In other words, unlike Arabs who knew their mother tongue intuitively and did not have to acquire it through formal study, non-Arab Muslims had to re-search their new faith's language in order to master it. They had to devote considerable time and effort to developing the needed philological tools. In any case, most early Muslim grammarians were Persians because Iran was the first advanced civilization that the Muslims managed to conquer.

All of this had no important impact on the fate of Persian as a language. Throughout this era, Persian language, folklore, and traditions continued to thrive among Iranian Muslims who saw no contradiction between adopting a new religion and maintaining their native language and culture.¹⁷ They spoke, sang, laughed, cried, cursed, and joked in the language that they had always used to do these things. They prayed in Arabic for the same reason that German, English, and African Catholics prayed in Latin until the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican finally abandoned that dead language in the late 20th Century. Actually, praying in an unintelligible language was nothing new to Persians be-





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cause even before the advent of Islam, Iranians were already praying in Avestan, an ancient liturgical language, that was, like Arabic, incomprehensible to all but the priests among them.

Iranians did not begin to speak in Arabic because they had to pray in Arabic any more than American Catholics abandoned English because they were supposed to recite most parts of the liturgy in Latin. It is a historically verifiable fact that the Muslim conquest of Iran brought about a lot of changes to our country; but silencing our language was not one of them. Iranians, even those who had converted to Islam, and were devout enough to fight for their new religion, continued to speak and think in Persian. A vast body of evidence in classical Persian and Arabic sources supports this incontestable fact. Let me present only two pieces of evidence, for brevity's sake. These are two testimonies by Arab eye-witnesses about the language of Iranian Muslims in the 7th century A.D.

In the year 66 *hejri* (A.D. 686) the Caliph in Damascus dispatched an army to fight the Shiite rebel, Mokhtār ibn Abi ‘Obeyd near the city of Mosul, in present day Iraq. Mokhtār’s forces were Iranian residents of Kufa, which was ethnically predominantly Iranian at that time. Being fully aware of the ethnic composition of Mokhtār’s forces, the Arab commander of the Damascene army spoke to his men saying: “O’ men of Syria! You are fighting against fugitive slaves and those who have abandoned Islam, and cannot [even] speak in Arabic.” In a later battle, Mokhtār’s army under the command of Ebrāhim ibn Mālek al-Ashtar faced the Umayyad forces in August of the year 686. Two Arab noblemen came to Ebrāhim’s camp in order to persuade him to change sides, and abandon Mokhtār. One of them said to him:

What deepened our sorrow since we entered your encampment is that we did not hear a single word of Arabic [spoken] from the time we set foot among your forces until the time that we reached your [tent]. How can you expect to fight the nobles and warriors of Arabia with these Persians?” Ebrāhim responded: “These are the sons of Iranian nobles and warriors. None can fight the army of Syria better than these.”¹⁸

The important point in these examples is that the Iranian warriors of Mukhtār’s armies were devout Muslims willing to lay their lives on the





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line for their religion. However, these men's devotion to Islam did not mean that they had abandoned their native language. They used the same language that their ancestors had always used. The only thing different was their faith, a detail that was noticed by the Arab envoys who ventured among them.

Persian was not under any systematic attack, even in the heart of the Caliphate, and it continued to thrive long after the Muslim conquest. These facts can be inferred from the testimony of early Arabic texts. For instance, the great Arab author, al-Jāhiz (776-868), tells us that there was a bilingual Persian preacher in Basra who was quite popular with that city's Arab and Persian residents. Those who attended his sermons would sit in two separate crowds: the Arabs to his right, and the Persians to his left. He would recite a verse from the Koran, and expound upon it in Arabic for his Arab listeners, and again in Persian for his Persian audience. Jāhiz adds that the holy man's mastery of both languages was so complete that one could not know whether he was more eloquent in Persian or more fluent in Arabic.¹⁹ This statement has important implications because it was made by al-Jāhiz, who was a native speaker of Arabic.

Aside from being a great literary figure, Jāhiz was a native of Basra: he had first-hand knowledge of this preacher. He was well aware of the popular, influential and important men in his town, and also about what languages were spoken there. Moreover, Jāhiz had excellent political connections: he could count the Caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813-833), the vizier, Ibn Zayyāt (789-848), the chief judge, Ahmad ibn Abi Du'ād (d. 854), and the influential courtier, Fath ibn Khāqān (c. 817-861) among his patrons. He was a mover and shaker, who represented the views of his society's most powerful political and intellectual elite. The testimony of such a scholar should be given the weight that it deserves. Moreover, we can infer from Jāhiz's statement that this native Arabic speaker in Basra knew the Persian language well enough to rightly judge if others spoke it eloquently. That's why his observation about the Basran preacher's fluency in Persian and in Arabic is important. Indeed, Jāhiz's two most important works, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn* (*The Book of Eloquence and Exposition*), a massive treatise on rhetoric, and his *Kitāb al-Hayawān* (*The Book of Animals*) include an enormous





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number of Persian loan-words and expressions.

Evidence from the works of other Arab historians and geographers, such as al-Mas'udi, the erudite polymath and littérateur who was born in Baghdad c 896, and died in Cairo in 956, al-Maqdasi al-Bashshāri who was born in the first half of the 10th century in Jerusalem, and others, clearly demonstrates that these Arab scholars knew Persian. In fact, al-Maqdasi knew the language well enough to be able to discern differences in Persian dialects, which he discusses in his geographical magnum opus, *Ahsan al-Taqāsīm fī Ma'rifat al-Aqālim* (*The Best Categorization on Knowledge of Regions*).²⁰ Furthermore, as Professor Mohammadi points out, one of the most authoritative classical dictionaries of Arabic, namely, the *Lisān al-'Arab* (*The Arabic Language*), authored by the North African scholar, Ibn Manzur (1233-1311), occasionally gives the Persian equivalents of the Arabic words that it glosses. Mohammadi makes the following important observation about Ibn Manzur's lexicon:

It may be inferred from this that Persian language was not unfamiliar to the literate classes of that period. Otherwise, including Persian vocabulary in definitions of Arabic words in an Arabic lexicon would have been not only absurd but also an act of irrationality, [quite] at odds with the scholarly and wise aims of the African author of this dictionary.²¹

The need to learn Persian was not limited to the scholarly ranks of the classical period. Many Arab warlords, aristocrats, and administrators also had to develop a working knowledge of Persian for purely practical reasons, such as communicating with their underlings. So the idea that after the Muslim conquest, Iranians forgot their language and culture to absorb Arabic idiom and custom has no basis in fact. Neither does the notion that a unilateral movement in Arabic language absorption took place in Iran as a result of which the Persian language was silenced. Military conquest does not automatically lead to cultural and linguistic defeat of the conquered population. Armies are good at killing people, not changing them. This is especially true of countries like Iran, which at the time of the conquest had powerful and ancient institutions that exerted a lasting influence upon the culture of the invaders.





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II. Language and Bureaucracy:

Vast empires depend on huge bureaucracies, and the Persian Empire was no exception. The functioning of Sassanid Iran's centralized bureaucracy necessitated a literary language that could be understood throughout the country's vast expanse. That means the empire's bureaucratic language had to be understood both by Sassanid officials at the court and provincial capitals, and also by all who fell under that bureaucracy's dominion. Different parts of the empire's vast officialdom could not function without a means of communicating with one another. Richard Frye believes that a Middle Persian *koine*—that is, a language understood over a vast area in which different languages or dialects are locally used—had spread throughout the empire, and had even penetrated beyond its boundaries into Central Asia and Afghanistan.²² Frye is quite right. I would add that since the late 6th century, a form of spoken Persian very similar to that which Ferdowsi spoke, probably evolved side-by-side with that official *koine*. In other words, Iran had developed a form of diglossia in which Pahlavi Middle Persian had become an archaic tongue that was artificially preserved by the scribal and religious classes for bureaucratic and religious purposes. Alongside this official *koine*, early New Persian served as the *koine* of day-to-day life. The great scholar of Iranian languages, Walter Bruno Henning (1908-1967) is reported to have said that the language which Khosrow II (591-628) spoke (as distinct from official Middle Persian) was so close to the language of Ferdowsi that if Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* could be read to the king, he would have understood most of it.²³

The Muslim conquest did not destroy Persian in its spoken form—the language of Iranians' everyday life. It merely put an end to their other language, namely that artificial written language which Middle Persian (Pahlavi) had frozen into. The Muslim conquest put an end to Iran's official language by eliminating, absorbing and co-opting the bureaucracy and the priesthood which perpetuated that mannered linguistic artifice. Once the Sassanid bureaucracy and priesthood were gone, the need for maintaining their artificial language also disappeared. In time, Arabic replaced Pahlavi as the Arabic Empire's bureaucratic language. Thus, Pahlavi Middle Persian died, while Persian *per se* survived, and in fact, even thrived. There was no longer an outmoded, pedantic idiom to impede





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the progress of the society's natural language or to prevent its flowering into a literary means of communication. Therefore, by the time Iranians switched their alphabet from the awkward Middle Persian writing system to the simpler, more efficient Arabic letters of their conquerors, we find them in possession of a well developed language that they could express in textual form using their new writing system.

This scenario can more plausibly explain the abrupt appearance of highly developed Persian prose and poetry in the late 9th and early 10th centuries. The refined and polished verse of such early poets as Hanzala of Bādghis (c. 850), Abu Salik (fl. end of the 9th century), Abu Shakur of Balkh (fl. 941), and Rudaki (d. 940) cannot be explained without assuming a long period of quiet development between the fall of Iran in the mid 7th century and the first appearance of the highly refined classical Persian prose and poetry in the mid 9th century. The literary monuments of early Persian literature are too well formed and mature to have conceivably been created under the Muslim Samanid rulers or even slightly earlier. A long period of formation must be assumed. Classical Persian literature did not burst out of its creators' heads fully formed in the manner that Athena burst out of Zeus's skull. It had a long and quiet gestation period in Persian culture before attaining its mature form in the work of the Samanid poets. By the time Ferdowsi began his artistic career, the language was fully developed and ready for him.

iii. The Father or the Child?

Iran's national poet was neither an ordinary "man of the people," as the bankrupt historiography of the left would have us believe, nor was he mulling about absorbing the bucolic yarns of street storytellers, as the Neo-Orientalist romantics of the West propose. Ferdowsi was a highly educated man with an unsurpassed understanding of his nation's cultural, linguistic, and historical settings. He was at home in a literary *koine* that had been in use among the elite of his country for some time before his birth. He aimed to fashion a major work of art in that literary *koine* that he would offer to his own class, the learned elite of his time, for financial reward and for personal recognition. His motivations, therefore, were no different from the motivations of most





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authors, even those who live in our own time.

The commonly held belief that Ferdowsi forged the Persian language is false. It is false, because by the time Ferdowsi appeared, the Persian language had already attained its fully mature literary form. He wasn't a linguistic innovator; he was a major artist who fully utilized the wide range of a highly developed culture that was available to him. In spite of this historically verifiable fact, the notion that Ferdowsi fathered the Persian language is firmly believed by most Iranians. This belief is iconographically enshrined by the poet's statue at the center of Ferdowsi Square in Tehran. Ferdowsi is depicted as a heroic and paternal figure protectively standing over a child that some believe is the infant Zāl, but might as well represent Persian language in its infancy. This *kitsch* iconography ignores the fact that Persian was in use as a literary *koine* throughout a vast area that covered all of Iran, Afghanistan, and much of Central Asia and Mesopotamia long before Ferdowsi's parents had their first date.

The Persian language already had to be fully functional and equipped with all of the tools that Ferdowsi would need for his life's work, *before he could begin*. Standard scholarship on Persian literature, however, promotes a very different impression. Iranian literary scholarship paints an upside down picture of Persian language, and creates a topsy-turvy world in which historical and cultural facts are distorted by the psychological needs of those who write about them. Ferdowsi created *neither* the rich vocabulary *nor* the linguistic structures in which he cast his enchanting poem. Quite the opposite, his poetry was born of the language that nourished his soul and enabled his art. Ferdowsi and his *Shāhnāme* are, therefore, the offsprings of Persian language, *not* its parents. It was the existence of New Persian as a mature medium of literary communication that led to Ferdowsi, not the other way around. The language gave birth to the poet, it was not born of him.

I'm going to try to support my statements with a number of examples that demonstrate the actual linguistic state of Iran during Ferdowsi's life. This material is excerpted from Persian poetry by artists who either lived before Ferdowsi's birth in around 940, or were his contemporaries. These works will give you a taste of the literary context that shaped Ferdowsi's work, and show how fully formed Iran's literary language was long before





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our national poet was born. I have loosely organized my samples around the social class of their authors, because I want readers to get a feeling for the intellectual atmosphere of Ferdowsi's era. I want to demonstrate that, as a member of Iran's provincial gentry, our poet was a product of a highly literary and elitist upper class culture that permeated every form of Persian literary discourse. His poem, therefore, was primarily the product of this aristocratic setting.

Excluding the *Shāhnāme*, some 8,654 couplets or 17,308 lines of verse has survived from the Samanid period up to the year 998. If we include Persian verses that have survived through the early Ghaznavid period, this number grows nearly twenty folds, to 164,593 couplets or 329,186 lines.²⁴





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If we add the surviving prose literature of the period to our count we end up with thousands of pages that constitute a massive and sophisticated literary corpus. This is hardly the state of a language in its infancy.

An examination of Persia's pre-Ferdowsi poetry gives an informative glimpse into its social context. What is immediately striking about this material is that much of it is composed by the country's nobility and by her government officials and scholars. This is in striking contrast to the situation of letters in Western Europe, where until the Italian Renaissance, most kings and their officials were illiterate.

Literacy was comparatively common among Muslims, and it was especially wide-spread in the upper classes. This has important implications for the study of the *Shāhnāmeh*. The most important ramification is that the drastic difference between the social contexts of classical Persian literature and its medieval European counterpart makes any analogies drawn between the two suspect at best, when not entirely fatuous. Keeping this difference in mind, let's explore some examples of Persian poetry during Ferdowsi's time. These samples are given in the original Persian for those of you who can read the language; everybody else will have to deal with the serviceable but clunky English translations. Alternatively, you can ask your grandparents or parents to read the Persian to you, and listen to the beautifully composed sounds and rhythms.

The first piece is by one of the last princes of the Samanid dynasty (819-1005). This was a king by the name of Mansur II (997-999), whose short reign was marked by incessant warfare and political turmoil. He spent almost all of his young life under pressure, trying to regain control of his realm. His efforts, however, came to nothing: on February 7, 999, he was captured by his enemies who blinded him and placed his infant brother on the throne. Mansur gives a glimpse of his turbulent reign in the following verses:

گویند مرا: چون سَلَبِ خوب نسازی	مأوی گه آراسته و فرشِ مَلُـوَن
با نعره گُردان چه کنم لحنِ مُعَنَّی	با پویه اسپان چه کنم مجلسِ گلشن
جوش می و نوش لبِ ساقی به چه کارست	جوشیدنِ خون باید، بر عیبِ جوشن
اسپست و سلاحت مرا بزمگه و باغ	تیرست و کمانست مرا لاله و سوسن

They ask me why fine robes I do not wear,
Nor covet stately tent with carpets rare.





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'Midst clash of arms, what boots the minstrel's power
'Midst rush of steeds, what place for rose-girt bower
Nor wine nor sweet-lipped Saqi aught avail
Where blood is spattered o'er the coats of mail.
Arms, horse for me banquet and bower enow,
Tulip and lily mine the dart and bow.²⁵

Following the young prince's unfortunate end, Mahmud of Ghazna (d. 1030), who was in his service, and to whom Ferdowsi was to dedicate his great poem a few years later, avenged his lord, and in the process brought the Samanid dynasty to an end. Although much maligned by the Persian *Shāhnāme* critics, Mahmud was a highly literate man and a great patron of Persian poetry. It is said that when his favorite slave-woman, whose name was *Golestān*, passed away, the king was deeply saddened, and elegized his beloved in these verses:

خاک را بر سپهر فضل آمد	تا تو ای ماه زیر خاک شدی
این قضا از خدای، عدل آمد	دل جزع کرد، گفتم ای دل صبر
هرکه زو زاد باز اصل آمد	آدم از خاک بود خاکی شد

O Moon! Since thou in earth entombed dost lie,
I love earth more than sky.
"Patience!" to my despairing heart I said,
"God's fate is justly sped.
Of earth was Adam; and his children all
Return, like him, to their original."²⁶

Among other Iranian nobles whose verse has deservedly survived, one may mention the Emir Āghājī, a contemporary of the Samanid prince Nuh (977-997), who boasts of his abilities in these verses:

خواهی که بدانی که نیم نعمت پرورد،	ای آن که نداری خبری از هنر من
شعر و قلم و ربط و شطرنج و می و نرد	اسپ آرو کمند آرو کتاب آرو کمان آرو

Ho, thou who takest no account of what my skills may be,
Test!—Thou wilt find I was not reared 'mid luxury abhorred;
Bring forth the steed, the noose, the bow, and bring the book to me,





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Verse, pen, and lute,—bring on the wine, chess, and backgammon board!²⁷

A lesser aristocrat, Abu Zorāʿa of Jorjān, who died in the year of Ferdowsi's birth, advertises his personal abilities in the following verses:

وانجا که سخن باید، چون موم کنم آهن	آنجا که درم باید، دینار براندازم
گه با قدح و بربط، گه با زره و جوشن	چون باد همی گردد، با باد همی گردم

Where there is giving afoot, for silver gold do I fling,
And where there is speaking, hard steel to the softness of wax I bring;
Where there are winds a-whirling, there like the wind I pass,
Now with the lute and the goblet, now with the mailed cuirass!²⁸

Let's leave the nobility of our glorious past and turn to a 10th century poet by the name of Rābeʿah, the daughter of Kaʿb. She was a native of Qozdār, a city near the Indian borders of old Iran, and was quite famous for her mystical and love poetry:

کوشش بسیار نامد سودمند	عشق او باز اندر آوردم به بند
کی توان کردن شنا؟ ای هوشمند!	عشق، دریائی کرانه ناپدید
بس که بیسندید باید ناپسند	عشق را خواهی که تا پایان بری
زهر باید خورد و انگارید قند	زشت باید دید و انگارید خوب
کز کشیدن تنگ تر گردد کمند	توسنی کردم، ندانستم همی

His love has caught me once again—
I struggled fiercely, but in vain,
Well, sobersides, explain to me
Who can swim love's shoreless sea!
To reach love's goal you must accept
All you instinctively reject—
See ugliness as beauty, eat
His poison up and call it sweet.
I jerked my head to work it loose
Not knowing all this would produce
Was further tightenings of the noose.²⁹





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Remember, these were amateurs. Turning to professional poets, we find a language much richer and more supple than the aspirants. Consider the following few verses by the court poet, Rudaki (d. 940), in praise of wine:

و یا چون برکشیده تیغ پیشِ آفتابستی	بیار آن می که پنداری روان یاقوتِ نابستی
به خوشی گویی اندر دیده بی خواب، خوابستی	به پاکی گوئی اندر جام، مانندِ گلابستی
طرب گوئی که اندر دل دعایِ مستجابستی	سحابستی قدح گوئی و می قطره سحابستی
اگر در کالبد جان را ندیدی، شرابستی	اگر می نیستی یکسر همه دلها خرابستی
از آن تا ناکسان هرگز نخوردندی، صوابستی	اگر این می به ابر اندر به چنگالِ عقابستی

Bring me yon wine which thou might'st call a melted ruby in its cup,
Or like a scimitar unsheathed, in the sun's noon-tide light held up.
'Tis the rose-water, thou might'st say, yea thence distilled for purity;
Its sweetness fall as sleep's own balm steals o'er the vigil-wearied eye.
Thou mightest call the cup the cloud, the wine the raindrop from it cast,
Or say the joy that fills the heart whose prayer long looked-for comes at last.
Were there no wine all hearts would be a desert waste, forlorn and black,
But were our last life-breath extinct, the sight of wine would bring it back,
O if an eagle would but swoop, and bear the wine up to the sky,
Far out of reach of all the base, who would not shout "Well done!" as I?³⁰

Let me end this section with a final panegyric by one of Ferdowsi's contemporaries, the poet Farrokhi, who resided in King Mahmud's court, and died a young man in 1037, only a few years after Ferdowsi's own death:³¹

پرنیان هفت رنگ اندر سر آرد کوهسار	چون پرنده نیلگون بر روی پوشد مرغزار
بید را چون پَر طوطی برگ روید بی شمار،	خاک را چون ناف آهو مشک زاید بی قیاس
حَبْذًا بادِ شمال و خَرْمًا بوی بهار	دوش وقت نیم شب بوی بهار آورد باد
باغ گوئی لعبتان ساده دارد در کنار	باد گوئی مشکِ سوده دارد اندر آستین
نسترن لؤلؤی لالا دارد اندر گوشوار	ارغوان لعل بدخشی دارد اندر مُرسَله
پنجه های دستِ مردم سرفروگرد از چنار	تا بر آمد جامهای سرخِ مل بر شاخِ گل
آب مروارید رنگ و ابر مروارید بار	باغ بوقلمون لباس و راغ بوقلمون نمای





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باغ های پرنگار از داغگاه شهریار
 کاندرو از نیکویی حیران بماند روزگار
 خیمه اندر سبزه بینی چون حصار اندر حصار
 خیمه ها با بانگ نوش و ساقیان میگسار
 هر کجا سبزه ست، شادان یاری از دیدار یار
 طربان رود و سرود می گشان خواب و خمار
 از پی داغ آتشی افروخته خورشید وار
 گرم چون طبع جوان و زرد چون زر عیار
 هر یکی چون ناردانه گشته اندر زیر نار
 مرکبان داغ ناکرده، قطار اندر قطار
 با کمند شصت خم در دست چون اسفندیار
 همچو عهد دوستان سالخورده، استوار
 شادمان و شادخوار و کامران و کامکار
 چون عصای موسی اندر دست موسی گشته مار
 گشت داغش بر سرین و شانه و رویش نگار
 شاعران را با لگام و زایران را با فسار

راست پنداری که خلعت های رنگین یافتند
 داغگاه شهریار اکنون چنان خرم بود
 سبزه اندر سبزه بینی، چون سپهر اندر سپهر
 سبزه ها با بانگ رود و مطربان چربدست
 هر کجا خیمه ست، خفته عاشقی بادوست، مست
 عاشقان بوس و کنار و نیکوان ناز و عتاب
 بر در پرده سرای خسرو پیروز بخت
 بر کشیده آتشی چون مطرد دیبای زرد
 داغ ها چون شاخه های بُسَد یاقوت رنگ
 ریدکان خواب نادیده، مصاف اندر مصاف
 خسرو فرخ سیر، بر بارهء دریا گذر
 همچو زلف نیکوان خردساله، تاب خورد
 فخر دولت، بوالمظفر شاه، با پیوستگان
 اژدها کردار پیچان در کفِ رادش کمند
 هر که را اندر کمند شصت بازی در فکند
 هر چه زین سوداگر کرد از سوی دیگر هدیه داد

Since the meadow hides its face in satin shot with greens and blues,
 And the mountains wrap their brows in silver veils of seven hues,
 Earth is teeming like the musk-pod with aromas rich and rare,
 Foliage bright as parrot's plumage doth the graceful willow wear.
 Yestere'en the midnight breezes brought the tidings of the spring:
 Welcome, O ye northern gales, for this glad promise which ye bring!
 Up its sleeve the wind, meseemeth, pounded musk hath stored away,
 While the garden fills its lap with shining dolls, as though for play.
 On the branches of sycamore necklaces of pearls we see,
 Ruby ear-rings of Badakhshān sparkle on the Judas-tree.
 Since the branches of the rose-bush carmine cups and beakers bore
 Human-like five-fingered hands reach downwards from the sycamore.
 Gardens all chameleon-coated, branches with chameleon whorls,
 Pearly-lustrous pools around us, clouds above us raining pearls!
 So that all this age of ours in joyful wonder stands a-gaze.





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Green within the green you see, like stars within the firmament;
Like a fort within a fortress spreads the army, tent on tent.
Every tent contains a lover resting in his sweetheart's arms,
Every patch of grass revealeth to a friend a favourite's charms.
Harps are sounding midst the verdure, minstrels sing their lays divine,
Tents resound with clink of glasses as the pages pour the wine.
Kisses, claspings from the lovers; coy reproaches from the fair;
Wine-born slumbers for the sleepers, while the minstrels wake the air.
Branding-fires, like suns ablaze, are kindled at the spacious gate
Leading to the state-pavilion of our Prince so fortunate.
Leap the flames like gleaming lances draped with yellow-lined brocade.
Hotter than a young man's passion, yellower than gold assayed.
Branding-tools like coral branches ruby-tinted glow amain
In the fire, as in the ripe pomegranate glows the crimson grain.
Rank on rank of active boys, whose watchful eyes no slumber know;
Steeds which still await the branding, rank on rank and row on row.
On his horse, the river-forder, roams our genial Prince afar,
Ready to his hand the lasso, like a young Isfandiyār.
Like the locks of pretty children see it how it curls and bends,
Yet be sure its hold is stronger than the covenant of friends.
Bu'l-Mudhaffar Shah, the Upright, circled by a noble band,
King and conqueror of cities, brave defender of the land.
Serpent-coiled in skilful hand his whirling noose fresh forms doth take,
Like unto the rod of Moses metamorphosed to a snake.
Whosoever hath been captured by that noose and circling line,
On the face and flank and shoulder ever bears the royal sign.
But, though on one side he brandeth, give he also rich rewards,
Leads his poets with a bridle, binds his guests as though with cords.

I can go on quoting ode after ode by the poets who lived just before Ferdowsi's time, or were his contemporaries. The character of their verse and the sophistication of its style show that labeling Ferdowsi the "father of Persian language" is both hyperbolic and inaccurate.

Persian was far too developed a language by the time of Ferdowsi to be in need of a father. It was a language that had already sired a





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rich poetic tradition and many major literary artists. Ferdowsi, therefore, is better understood as the child of Persian, rather than her father. And in that respect, at least, the history of classical Persian literature should be turned right side up from its present topsy-turvy position.

ENDNOTES

- 1 In this scheme, the European languages that are spoken in the American continent (i.e., English, Spanish, and French) are considered transplants from Europe, and need not enter the discussion.
- 2 My learned mentor, Professor Martin Schwartz of UC Berkeley pointed out to me that in spite of its greater apparent similarity in sound and meaning to *gereftan*, the German word *greifen* is not a cognate of the Persian infinitive, which is in turn related to the Avestan *gərəʃša-*.
- 3 Unlike an alphabet that has symbols for various sounds, a syllabary is the kind of writing system that has symbols for different syllables. Thus, rather than having a sign to express the letter *k*, Old Persian has a sign to express the sound *ka*.
- 4 Kent, Ronald G. *Old Persian: Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*. (New Haven, Connecticut: American Oriental Society, 1953), p.12.
- 5 You can find a pictorial history of the English alphabet's individual letters in the various sections of the *American Heritage Dictionary*. See also Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp.258-264.
- 6 Many editions and translations of this poem are available in English references. For example: D. G. Scragg, *The Return of the Vikings: The Battle of Maldon 991* (Stroud: Tempus, 2006) and John C. Pope, *Eight Old English Poems*, Rev. 3rd edition prepared by Robert D. Fulk, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).
- 7 Several of the Old English characters could not be reproduced by the fonts at my disposal, and I have had to render them the best that I could with what I have. However, regardless of the accuracy of my transliteration, the reader can see how vast the differences between Old English and Modern English are.
- 8 David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 12.
- 9 Quoted from Marilyn Corrie, "Middle English—Dialects and Diversity," in *The Oxford History of English*, edited by Lynda Mugglestone, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 88-89.
- 10 I am very grateful to my young friends, Mr. Mehran Afshari and Mr. Shahriyar Shahindezhi in Tehran who contacted Professor Zarrinkoob's publisher and provided me with the publication details of his most influential work.
- 11 زرّین کوب، عبدالحسین. دو قرن سکوت: سرگذشت حوادث و اوضاع تاریخی ایران در دو قرن اول اسلام از: حمله عرب تا ظهور دولت طاهریان. چاپ ششم (تهران: امیرکبیر، ۱۹۷۶)، صص ۱۱۲-۱۱۳.
- 12 For detailed studies of Persian linguistic and cultural influence on the pre-Islamic and Muslim Arabs see:





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- محمد محمدی ملایری. تاریخ و فرهنگ ایران در دوران انتقال از عصر ساسانی به عصر اسلامی. ج ۴ و مجلد پیوست‌ها، صص ۱۳۳-۳۷، ۲۶۷-۱۹۷، ۴۲۷-۳۶۳. نیز محمد محمدی ملایری، فرهنگ ایرانی پیش از اسلام و آثار آن در تمدن اسلامی و ادبیات عربی. چاپ پنجم (تهران: توس، ۱۳۸۴)، صص ۴۶-۴۵. آذرتاش آذرنوش. راههای نفوذ فارسی در فرهنگ و زبان عرب جاهلی. چاپ دوم با تجدید نظر (تهران: توس، ۱۳۷۴)؛ آذرتاش آذرنوش. چالش میان فارسی و عربی: سده‌های نخست. (تهران: نشر نی، ۱۳۸۵).
- 13 محمدی، ج ۴، ص ۴۰.
- 14 نگاه کنید به محمدی، تاریخ و فرهنگ ایران در دوران انتقال از عصر ساسانی به عصر اسلامی. ۵ مجلد (چاپ دوم، تهران: توس ۱۳۷۹)، ج ۴ صص ۱۸-۹؛ نیز آذرنوش، چالش میان فارسی و عربی در سده‌های نخست (تهران: نشر نی ۱۳۸۵)، صص ۲۷-۱۳، ۱۰۱-۹۰؛ نیز آذرنوش، راه‌های نفوذ فارسی، مخصوصاً صص ۱۴۵ به بعد.
- 15 محمدی، پیوست‌ها، صص ۶۲۱-۵۲۱.
- 16 Tafazzoli, Ahmad. *Sasanian Society, I. Warriors, II. Scribes, III. Dehqāns* (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2000), p.15.
- 17 Professor Azarnoush has provided a useful list of evidence about the prevalence of Persian among the general public, both inside and outside Iran, from the early classical Arabic sources. See:
آذرتاش آذرنوش، چالش میان فارسی و عربی سده‌های نخست (تهران: نشر نی، ۱۳۸۵)، صص ۱۲۵-۱۰۱.
- 18 محمد محمدی ملایری، تاریخ و فرهنگ ایران در دوران انتقال از عصر ساسانی به عصر اسلامی. ۵ مجلد، چاپ دوم (تهران: توس، ۹۷۳۱)، ج ۱ صص ۹۵-۹۴. و نگاه کنید به منابع او درین بخش.
- 19 ابو عثمان عمرو بن بحر الجاحظ، البیان و التبيين، بتحقيق و شرح عبدالسلام محمد هارون. ۴ مجلد (الطبعة الخامسة، القاهرة: مكتبة الخانجي، ۱۹۸۵)، ج ۱ ص ۳۶۸.
- 20 محمد محمدی ملایری، تاریخ و فرهنگ ایران، ج ۴، صص ۳۵-۳۳.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, p.232.
- 23 Professor Khaleghi-Motlagh's verbal communication.
- 24 For general information and statistics about Persian poetry before and about the time of Ferdowsi see:
سیروس شمیسا. سبک‌شناسی شعر (تهران: انتشارات فردوس)، صص ۴۵-۲۴.
- 25 The English translation is taken from Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*. 4 volumes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), vol.1, p.469.
- 26 The English translation is taken from Reynold A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Poetry*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969. Originally published in 1921), p.21.
- 27 The translation is from A. V. Williams Jackson. *Early Persian Poetry From the Beginnings Down to the Time of Firdausi* (Boston: Milford House, 1972, reprint of 1920 edition), p.30.
- 28 Browne, *Literary History*, vol.1, p.459.
- 29 The translation is from Dick Davis, *Borrowed Ware: Epigrams from Medieval Persian 9th to 13th Centuries* (Florence, Kentucky: Robert L. Barth, 1990), p.4.
- 30 The translation is by Edward Byles Cowell, professor of Persian and Sanskrit at Cambridge, and the teacher of both, Edward G. Browne, and Edward Fitzgerald, Khayyam's famous translator. See Browne, *Literary History*, vol.1, pp.457-458.
- 31 The Persian text is taken from Professor Dabir-Siyāqi's standard edition of the poet's divan. The order of verses in this edition slightly differs from the text that Edward G. Browne has





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used in his English translation. However, readers who can read Persian can see the slight difference, and those who cannot need not worry about the slight discrepancy. The English translation is taken from Browne, *Literary History*, vol.2, pp.126-127.





Chapter 6



Ferdowsi in Fact and Fancy

Folk-stories tend to attach themselves to life-histories of great men. The more an extraordinary individual matters to a culture, the quicker and more thoroughly the union of fact and fancy in his vita. In time, myth completely masks history and produces a narrative that is more responsive to the culture's emotional needs than it is to scholarship's requirements of accuracy, or even factuality. Life histories of Alexander the Great, Virgil, and George Washington in the West, and those of Anushirvān, Shāh Abbās, Soltān Mahmud, Ferdowsi, Khayyām, Saʿdi and others in Persian culture are thick with tales. But as beautiful, interesting, and culturally significant many of these tales might be, they should not be confused with history.

The legends attached to Ferdowsi's biography in classical Persian texts, have buried the scant historical evidence under a thick layer of apocrypha. These tales, because of their age and the peoples' will to believe them, are endowed with an air of authenticity that cannot be justified by evidence.¹ But legends must be studied as legend, and facts as fact; so, old or not, we should at least try to sort fact from fable in our study of Ferdowsi's biography. The legendary aspects of our national poet's vita can't be examined as history. Their investigation should be conducted in the confines of folklore scholarship rather than historical investigation.

Let's look at an example of this literary folklore by translating the relevant parts of the earliest and most influential version of Ferdowsi's biography. This is the version given by Nezāmi-ye ʿAruzi (died c. 1165)





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in his *Chahār Maqāla* (*The Four Discourses*). This work's full text was translated into English by Edward G. Browne (1862-1926).² I will provide a necessarily long extract here in order to give the reader a taste of what biographical information about Ferdowsi in classical Persian sources sounds like:

Ferdowsi belonged to the provincial gentry of [the region] of Tus, and hailed from a large township called Bāž. ... He had considerable holdings in that township, the income from which could comfortably support him. He had only one daughter. Ferdowsi was busily versifying the *Shāhnāme*h, and hoped to spend any rewards which he might receive for it on acquiring a dowry for his daughter. He spent twenty five years on that book until he finished it; and truly it could not have been done better. ... [Finally] he finished the book, and [his scribe] transcribed it in seven volumes, and Ferdowsi ... took it to the capital Ghazneyn, where with the support of the grand vizier, Ahmad-e Hasan he offered it [to King Mahmud], who was quite pleased by it. ... However, the grand vizier had enemies who constantly schemed against him. Mahmud consulted these people about the amount of reward that he should give Ferdowsi [for his work]. They said: "fifty thousand silver coins; and even this would be too much, because he is a Shiite The Sultan was a zealot, and listened to their imputations and at the end, only twenty thousand coins were given to Ferdowsi. [The poet] was exceedingly hurt [by this], and he went to the public bath, and after he came out he drank a beer, and divided the royal prize between the bath keeper and the beer vendor [as gratuity]. However, fearing King Mahmud's punishment, he left the capital at night, and came to Herat, where ... he remained for six months as a fugitive. Meanwhile, the Sultan's agents went to [his hometown] of Tus looking for him, but had to return to the court [empty handed]. When he felt adequately secure, Ferdowsi returned to Tus, took the *Shāhnāme*h, and traveled to the court of the warlord Shahriyār in [the province of] Tabarestān. Shahriyār was a nobleman of the house of Bāvand, and ruled over Tabarestān. [The Bāvand family] is an illustrious line that traces its ancestry to the [Persian] emperor Yazdgerd. Ferdowsi then composed a satire against Mahmud in 100 verses, which he incorporated into the *Shāhnāme*h's preface, and recited it to Shahriyār, saying: "I will dedicate this book to you instead of to Mahmud because this book is entirely devoted to the stories and deeds of your ancestors." Shahriyār honored him and treated him kindly and responded: "O master! Mahmud was made to mistreat you [by others], and your book was not pre-





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sented to him in the manner that it should have been because of the scheming of those who misrepresented you. Moreover, you are a Shiite, and those who follow the family of the Prophet often suffer disappointment in worldly affairs, just as did the family of the Prophet. Mahmud is my liege lord. Let the *Shāhnāme* remain dedicated to him, and let me purchase the verses of your satire so that I may expunge them. Mahmud will, in time, call you forth and will fully gratify you. [having said all this], he sent 100,000 silver coins to Ferdowsi with this message: “I purchase each verse for a 1000 coins. Give me that 100 verses and reconcile your heart with the Sultan.” Ferdowsi sent him the verses, and the prince ordered them expunged, and Ferdowsi also destroyed his own rough copy of them. This is how Ferdowsi’s satire [against Mahmud] was destroyed. Only the following six couplets remain of it:

They said: “This bard of over-fluent song
Hath loved the Prophet and ‘Ali for long
Yea, when I sing my love for them, I could
Protect from harm a thousand like Mahmud.
But can we hope for any noble thing
From a slave’s son, e’en were his sire a king?
For had this King aught of nobility
High-throned in honour should I seated be.
But since his sires were not of gentle birth
He hates to hear me praising name of worth.”³

Truly, Shahriyār rendered a great service to Mahmud, and Mahmud felt exceedingly obliged to him. In the year 1121 [A.D.], in the city of Neyshābur, [the poet] Amir Mo‘ezzi said to me: “I heard from Amir ‘Abd al-Razzāq in the city of Tus, who told me: “Once, Mahmud was returning from India, and was advancing towards [his capital of] Ghaznah. He came upon a rebellious castellan and made camp at the gate of his castle. He then sent an envoy to the castellan, ordering him to come and bring an offering, so that he may receive robes of honor and return as [Mahmud’s vassal]. The next day, when Mahmud mounted and rode on with the grand vizier riding to his right, they saw the envoy returning. The sultan said to his vizier, “I wonder how the castellan replied.” The vizier recited this verse of Ferdowsi in response:

And should the reply with my wish not accord,
Then Afrāsiyāb’s field, and the mace, and the sword!





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Mahmud said, "Whose is this verse that overflows with manliness?" "It is poor Ferdowsi's" responded the vizier, "who toiled for twenty-five years and completed such a book without gaining anything for it." Mahmud said, "I am glad you reminded me of it. I regret not to have appreciated this noble man's accomplishment. Remind me to send him something when we reach the capital." In Ghaznah, the grand vizier reminded Mahmud [of Ferdowsi's affair], and the Sultan ordered that a load of indigo that was worth sixty-thousand gold coins, be loaded on royal camels and be sent to Ferdowsi to the city of Tus. [He also commanded] that apologies should be offered to the poet [for his mistreatment]. The grand vizier, who was concerned about Ferdowsi's affair for years, [quickly] arranged the transfer, and that load of indigo safely arrived at Ferdowsi's town. However, as the royal camel-train entered the poet's hometown through one gate, Ferdowsi's corpse was being carried out for burial through another.

There lived a very zealous preacher in Ferdowsi's town. He said, "I will not allow Ferdowsi to be buried in the Muslim cemetery because he was a Shi'ite;" and as much as the townspeople pleaded with him [to change his mind], he did not relent. But it so happened that Ferdowsi owned a garden within the city walls. [So, the people decided] to bury him in that garden [instead of the cemetery]. His grave can still be seen there today, and I paid a pilgrimage to it in the year 1122 [AD].

It is said that Ferdowsi was survived by a daughter of exceedingly noble spirit. They offered the Sultan's gift to her, but she refused to accept it, saying: "I need it not." The local intelligence chief reported this to the Sultan, who ordered that the meddlesome preacher be banished from that town as punishment, and that the prize money be given to the leader of a local ascetic sect, so that he may repair the rest-house of Chāha, which sits on the road between [the cities of] Merv and Neyshābur in the district of Tus. When the royal order reached Tus, they carried it out and the restoration of the rest-house of Chāha was effected from that fund.⁴

Details of our poet's life grow in number and outlandishness with the passage of time. The farther away from Ferdowsi's era we get, the fuller and more fantastic his legend becomes. However, in spite of the fact that a large number of texts have survived from Ferdowsi's era, none of the Ghaznavid authors who might have seen him actually mention Ferdowsi or refer to his *Shāhnāme* at all. The silence of Mahmud's court poets, historians, and other officials is specially striking. Of course, reference





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to various heroic and royal narratives that were collectively known as *Shāhnāmehs* abounds in prose and poetry of the Ghaznavid era. However, it is important to remember that these references are *not* to Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeḥ*. The word *Shāhnāmeḥ* denoted a general class of literary works, which narrated the stories of Iran's kings and heroes. This connotation for the word *Shāhnāmeḥ* was common until at least a century after Ferdowsi's death. Any book that dealt with the stories of ancient Persian kings and the adventures of ancient Persian heroes, whether it was in verse or in prose, was called a *Shāhnāmeḥ*. Therefore, don't assume that whenever the Ghaznavid poets use the word *Shāhnāmeḥ* in their verse they mean Ferdowsi's masterwork. There were a large number of *Shāhnāmehs* in circulation before and during Ferdowsi's lifetime.

Considering the great influence of Ferdowsi's poem, the silence of his contemporaries about his work has been a vexing problem. A number of scholars have tried to explain it in political terms. They have argued that because the poet had incurred the wrath of King Mahmud the literati of his court felt it imprudent to praise either him or his poem. According to this argument, Ferdowsi's contemporaries exerted a form of self-censorship and left all mention of the poet and his *Shāhnāmeḥ* out of their writing.

This explanation is flawed for several reasons. First, we have no verifiable evidence of Mahmud's dislike of Ferdowsi *at all*. What we *do* have are a group of legends reported by those who lived a century or more after the poet's death. Second, even assuming that the king disliked the poet, the silence of his court poets about Ferdowsi remains unexplained because none of these poets satirize Ferdowsi. After all, it was pretty much the primary job of a court poet to praise his patron's friends, and lampoon his enemies. Mahmud's court poets could have mocked or otherwise derided Ferdowsi and his poem. They could have mocked some aspect of his personality and his art in order to please their patron, as they did with many of their master's other enemies. As instruments of political propaganda, they had two primary tasks: to eulogize their master and those whom he liked, and to censure his enemies and those whom he disliked. But in spite of this obvious fact, none of them so much as alludes to Ferdowsi. That silence is, in my opinion, revealing. I think it simply





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indicates that they were unaware of Ferdowsi's existence. In other words, although Ferdowsi dedicated his poem to Mahmud, for one reason or another, he never managed to actually bring it to the king's attention, or to the attention of those who resided in his court, or had any clout in matters like this. As always, it's who you know, not how much you know, or how competent you are.

Although the classical accounts of the poet's biography are unreliable, Ferdowsi includes enough personal information in the *Shāhnāme* to help us infer the general outlines of his life. Let me present some of the more dependable information.

Ferdowsi was born into a minor provincial aristocratic family of moderate means near Tus, in northeastern Iran. We can deduce the year of his birth to have been around AD 940/941 based on three of his self-referential statements. First, in the exordium to the story of Kaykhosrow's Great War, he says that he is sixty-five years old, and also complains of the poverty that has beset him in old age. But he also tells us that when he was fifty-eight, he heard the mythical king Fereydun was reborn. By Fereydun, of course, he means King Mahmud, whose reign began in 998. Since he tells us that in 998 he was 58 years old, we may calculate the date of his birth to have been $(998 - 58 =)$ 940 AD. Here are the verses for those of you who prefer to enjoy his art (iv:172: 40-46):

چنین سال بگذاشتم شست و پنج	به درویشی و، زندگانی به رنج
چو پنج از بر سال شستم نشست	تن اندر نیشیب و سرم سوی پست
رخ لاله گون گشت برسان کاه	چو کافور شد رنگ مشک سیاه
بدانگه که بد سال پنجاه و هشت	نوان تر شدم چون جوانی گذشت
خروشی شنیدم ز گیتی بلند	که اندیشه شد تیز و تن بی گزند
که ای نامداران و گردن کشان	که جست از فریدون فرخ نشان
فریدون بیدار دل زنده شد	زمان و زمین پیش او بنده شد

Thus I lived sixty-five years
In poverty and hardship
At the end of my sixty fifth year, I was
Descending toward the grave, with my body growing more frail
My cheeks turning pale,
And my black beard assuming the white color of camphor.





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When I was fifty-eight, I grew weaker—alas, how youth passes!
A thundering proclamation reached my ears then
Whereat my mind grew sharp and my body sound again:
“Ye men of name and honor
Who seek some trace of Fereydun!
Fereydun of wakeful soul was revived,
The earth and time stand as bondslaves before him.

This date is confirmed by two other references in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. In the first, Ferdowsi says he is sixty-three years of age (vi:276:9). A few lines later he complains of having grown deaf in the 63rd year of his life, and that as he writes these verses, the first day of Bahman, the Persian month, has fallen on a Friday. We know that Bahman began on Friday only in the year 1003. So our poet, 63 years of age in 1003, would definitely have been born in 940.

The final evidence comes from the end of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, where Ferdowsi speaks of being 71 years old, and specifies that he completed his book in the year 400 according to the lunar Muslim calendar (*hejri*). Since at the time of completing his epic he was 71, using the reference to the year 400 *hejri*, we can calculate his date of birth as $(400 - 71 =)$ 329 *hejri*, which when converted into the Gregorian date gives us 940 A.D. Therefore, we can determine his year of birth with reasonable certainty, using his own statements in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*.

Though the year of Ferdowsi's birth may be determined with reasonable confidence, we cannot be equally certain about his first name, which is given variously as Mansur, Hasan, Ahmad, or Mohammad. We can suggest, however, that the name Mansur is most likely the correct one, because that is the name reported by the Arabic translator of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, who completed his work in 1224 A.D. The name is also confirmed by the manuscript tradition because it is the form that is used in a number of panels in the earliest manuscript of the poem, namely, the Florence manuscript that was copied in 1217. So it's reasonable to assume that Ferdowsi's first name was *believed* to have been Mansur by most scholars of the early 13th century, who were probably drawing on even earlier sources.

Although we cannot be definite about Ferdowsi's first name, we know





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that he was in fact known by the pen-name Ferdowsi. That's certain: he provides this information in the *Shāhnāme* (v:75:1-3):

چنان دید گوینده یک شب به خواب	که یک جام می داشتی چون گلاب
دقیقی ز جایی پدید آمدی	بر آن جام می داستانهازدی
به فردوسی آواز دادی که می	مخور جز برآیین کاوس کی

Thus was it that one night the poet dreamed:
He held a cup of wine whose fragrance seemed
Rosewater-like. Daqiqi from his stead
Appeared and, speaking of that wine-cup, said
Thus to *Ferdowsi*: "Quaff not save thou choose
The fashion of the days of Kaikāvus

Aside from these basic biographical facts, we can gather some ideas about his physical features, or at least the way he perceived these features to be. In his youth, he must have been a tall fellow with black hair, ruddy complexion, good teeth, and fine eye-sight. However, when he was fifty-eight, he began to experience the frailties of old age, and, by his sixty-fifth year, his hair had turned completely white, his eyesight had weakened, his straight back was bent, and he had also lost much of his hearing (ii:379-380:1-8, iv:172:41-42):

چو آمد بنزدیک سر تیغ شست	مده می که از سال شد مرد مست
بجای عنانم عصا داد سال	پراگنده شد مال و برگشت حال
همان دیدبان بر سر کوهسار	نبیند همی لشکر شهریار
کشیدن دشمن نداند عنان	مگر پیش مژگانش آید سنان
گراینده و تیز، پای نوند	همان شست بدخواه کردش به بند
سراینده ز آواز برگشت سیر	همش لحن بلبل، هم آواز شیر
چو برداشتم جام پنجاه و هشت	نگیرم مگر یاد تابوت و دشت
دریغ آن گل و مشک و خوشاب سی	همان تیغ برنده ی پارس سی...

When threescore years hang like a sword over the head,
Serve no wine, for the man is drunk by age.
Age replaced the reins in my fist by the cane.
My wealth is squandered and my fortune turned.
The watchman [i.e., his eyesight] cannot from his hill





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Decry the countless army of the king,
He does not pull on the reins while facing the enemy
Except when their spears confront the lashes of his eye.
My feet, so fleet and swift
Have been bound by pitiless threescore ...
My sweet voice has given up the song
Though it could once sing like a nightingale or roar like a lion
Since I rose the cup of fifty-eight to my lips,
I contemplate naught but the grave and the shroud.
Alas, my pearls-like teeth, rosy cheeks, and black hair
That sword-like speech when I was young.

Judging from an allusion in a verse in the *Shāhnāmeh*, it's likely that Ferdowsi had developed *dacryocystitis* with age. This is an inflammation of the ducts that help drain the eye's moisturizing liquids into the nasal cavity. In chronic cases, *dacryocystitis* causes excessive tearing of the eyes and may lead to blurred vision (vii:88:11):

خروشان شدن آن نرگسان دژم همی گیرد از رنج او پشت خم

My fierce eyes *bewail and run*
My back is bent under the pain they cause.

What little we know of Ferdowsi's family life from the *Shāhnāmeh* is stated relatively clearly. When he was sixty-seven years old, he lost his only son who was thirty-seven at the time. The poet tells us of the loss of his son in a moving elegy that is one of the best examples of its kind in classical Persian poetry (viii:167:2182 – 2189):

مراسال بگذشت بر شست و پنج	نه نیکو بودگر بی—ازم به گنج
مگر بهره برگیرم از پند خویش	بر اندیشم از مرگ فرزند خویش
مرا بود نوبت، برفت آن جوان	ز دردش منم چون تنی بی روان
شتابم همی تا مگر یابمش	چو یابم، به پیغاره بشتابمش
که نوبت مرا بود، بی کام من	چرا رفتی و بردی آرام من؟ ...
مگر همهان جوان یافتی؟	که از پیش من نیز بشتافتی؟
جوان را چو شد سال بر سی و هفت	نه بر آرزو یافت گیتی، برفت





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Older than sixty five,
Thoughts of worldly goods are not fitting.
Better to head the advice I deal out
And muse upon the passing of my son,
My turn it was and yet that youth departed,
His loss thus turned me into soulless clay.
I make haste, hoping to reach him,
And when I do, to reproachfully say:
"My turn it was to go; against my will
Why have you gone and robbed me of all my peace?" ...
Did you find younger companions?
That you left me so swiftly?"
When the youth's days reached seven years and thirty
He found the world distasteful and left.

Ferdowsi's autobiographical references reveal that his son's relationship with him may have been turbulent. His carefully crafted poem tells us that the old man was a perfectionist, and we can further infer that such a perfectionist character must have also been an emotionally demanding father. That would account for the strained paternal relationship. Ferdowsi's strategy of blaming his son for dying and leaving him alone in his old age seems a tell-tale clue to the dynamics of the relationship. It is as though he considers his son's untimely death an act of disobedience and abandonment:

"My turn it was to go; against my will
Why have you gone and robbed me of all my peace?" ...

But in spite of the bitterness of the blame that is implied in these verses, the old father's love for his child breaks through the still bitter grievance in the last moving lines where he blesses his son, asks forgiveness for his soul, and hopes to be reunited with him in the next world (viii:167-168:2190-2199):

برآشت و یکباره بنمود پشت	همی بود همواره بامن درشت
دل و دیده من به خون درنشانند	برفت و غم و دردش ایدر بماند
پدر را همی جای خواهد گزید	کنون او سوی روشنائی رسید





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ز دیر آمدن خشمم دارد همی	همانا مرا چشمم دارد همی
نپرسید ازین پیرو تنها برفت	ورا سال سی بُد مرا شست و هفت
ز کردارها تا چه آید به چنگ	وی اندر شتاب و من اندر درنگ
خرد پیش جان تو جوشن کناد	روان تو دارنده روشن کناد
ز روزی ده پاک پروردگار	همی خواهم از دادگر کردگار
درخشان کند تیره گاه و را	که یکسر ببخشد گناه و را

He was ever harsh with me
 He once raged, turned his back on me, and left.
 He departed, but but left me the sorrow and pain of his loss.
 And buried my heart and eyes in pain.
 Now has he reached the light [of paradise]
 And will choose a habitation for his sire
 He awaits me impatiently
 And is angered by my lingering.
 He was seven and thirty, I sixty seven
 He cared nothing for this aged man and departed alone.
 He making haste and I lingering,
 I wonder what would be the outcome of my labours.
 May God's grace clothe your soul in light
 And make wisdom a breastplate for your spirit.
 I beseech the just creator
 That bestower of sustenance, that pure nurturing lord
 To forgive him all his sins,
 And to grant him a luminous abode.

Ferdowsi's tumultuous relationship with his son must have influenced the *Shāhnāmeh's* poetry in the stanzas about fathers and sons, or the conflict between the aged and youth. Therefore, it may be that in his rendition of Rostam's fight with his son Sohrāb, and in his telling of the battle between the old Rostam and the youthful Esfandiyār, his tone expresses all the hurt and bitterness that may have governed his own relationship with his son. Perhaps he attains such remarkable heights of elegiac expression in these tales because of the great significance that the motif of father-son conflict had for him personally. Being the incomparable artist that he is, Ferdowsi draws upon his own





pain and infuses each character's sorrow with his own, and succeeds in weaving the two strands of psychological anguish into an intricate and magical web of verse to cast upon his reader.

I. Ferdowsi: The Frequently Asked Questions:

Most of my inferences about Ferdowsi's private life and circumstances may be accepted even by extremely devout Ferdowsi worshippers, because these conclusions are based on the poet's own words. But here I must part company with the relatively certain and enter the domain of the controversial. I must also ask my Iranian audience to put their hearts aside, and try to follow the rest of this argument with their heads. Because now, I intend to deconstruct some of the fanciful, but culturally cherished stories about Ferdowsi's life. Beautiful as these stories may be, they cannot form the basis of our understanding of Iran's national poet because they are simply not true.

Over the years, many interested Iranians have asked me these questions. I thought discussing them here might be useful to others who may be puzzled by the same issues about Ferdowsi and his *Shāhnāmeḥ*. Since this book is aimed primarily at youthful and computer-savvy Iranians who have lived most or all of their lives in the West, let's use a FAQ format to deconstruct Ferdowsi's standard biography.

II. Was Ferdowsi a Zoroastrian, and if not, was he Genuine in his Proclamation of Islam?

Most Persians, especially those who live in the West, project their own conflicted feelings about Islam back upon Ferdowsi. They turn him into someone who was either against Islam, or believed in one of pre-Islamic Persia's ancient religions. Some middle class professionals, with only an amateur's familiarity with Persian literature and Islam, imagine that Ferdowsi was a closet Zoroastrian. Others, usually former leftists, or those who have leftist leanings, want Ferdowsi to be either a materialist, or an anthropocentric who placed man at the center of all things. Ferdowsi is not the only victim of this bizarre crusade. Iran's other great classical poet Hafiz (d. 1389), a Muslim who knew the Koran by heart in fourteen different canonical readings, is surgically treated in the same fashion and





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comes out of the operating room as a follower of the Mithraic religion. These popular theories invariably depend on self-serving, nonsensical conjecture. But these conjectures are so fanciful that, in the words of Sir William Devenant (1606-1668), “inspiration itself could not begin to understand.”

Although we may all feel a certain frustration that many details of Ferdowsi's life are not as clear as we would like them to be, his religious affiliation is quite certain. There may be no doubt that he was a Muslim. Specialists have argued about which Muslim sect he belonged to; but no serious scholar has ever questioned his genuine devotion to Islam. Most agree that he was a Shiite; although some consider him to be a follower of the Ismaili branch of Shiism, while others see him as a Zeydi Shiite. In any case, none believe that he was anything but a Muslim.

Ferdowsi quite clearly states the evidence of his Shiite faith in the introductory part of the *Shāhnāme*, where he professes his Shiism in no uncertain terms (i:9-11:90-104):

ترا دانش دین رهاند درست	در رستگاری بیادست جست
دلت گر نخواهی که باشد نژند	همان تا نگریدی تن مستمند
چو خواهی که یابی ز هر بد رها	سراندر نیاری به دام بلا
بوی در دو گیتی ز بد رستگار	نکو کار کردی بر کردگار
به گفتار پیغمبرت راه جوی	دل از تیرگی ها بدین آب شوی
چه گفت آن خداوند تنزیل و وحی	خداوند امرو خداوند نهی
که من شارستانم علیم در است	درست این سخن گفت پیغمبرست
گواهی دهم این سخن راز اوست	تو گویی دو گوشم بر آواز اوست
حکیم این جهان را چو دریا نهاد	برانگیخته موج ازو تند باد
چو هفتاد کشتی بر او ساخته	همه بادبانها برافراخته
یکی پهن کشتی بسان عروس	بیارسته همچو چشم خروس
محمد بدو اندرون با علی	همان اهل بیت نبی و وصی
اگر چشم داری به دیگر سرای	به نزد نبی و وصی گیر جای
گرت زین بد آید گناه من است	چنین است و این دین و راه من است
برین زادم و هم برین بگذرم	چنان دان که خاک پی حیدرم





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A knowledge of religion will save you.
So, it's best to seek Salvation's gate;
If you don't want to have a sorrowful heart,
Nor to turn into a wretched soul,
If you want to be saved from all that is evil,
And not be snared by damnation
If you want to be blessed in both worlds
And be seen as virtuous by God,
Seek guidance in the words of your Prophet
And cleanse your heart from darkness by the water of his words
What was it that he said, that inspired lord of revelation?
That master of bidding and forbidding?
"I am the citadel of the knowledge, and 'Ali is my gate"
I witness that these are the true words of the Prophet.
I testify that these are his words
As though I can hear him by my own ears.
God created this world in the likeness of a sea
Whose waves are driven by the blast.
Seventy gallant ships sail upon its waters,
Each with her canvas unfurled.
One stately vessel in their midst,
Adorned like the eye of chancleer.
Mohammad and 'Ali sail in it,
Together with all their kin.
If it is the other world that you seek,
Keep close beside the Prophet and the *wasi*
And, should ill follow from this, lay the blame on me,
Who take myself the course that I advise.
In this Faith was I born, in this will I die;
Know that I am as dust under the steps of God's lion.

Iranian Muslims who remember their early religious instruction recognize the famous prophetic tradition (*hadith*) in which the Prophet says: "I am the city of knowledge and 'Ali is the gate thereof" in these verses. Those who know a bit more about religious matters also notice Ferdowsi's use of the word "*wasi*" in reference to Imam 'Ali, who according to us Shiites, was appointed as the Prophet's successor and executor (*wasi*). No other sect of Shiites uses the term (*wasi*) to refer to Imam 'Ali with





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as much regularity as do the Shiites. Ferdosi's repeated use of this term indicates that he belonged to this sect.

Furthermore, the fact that Ferdowsi places such a clear declaration of his religious preference at the beginning of his poem is significant: Mahmud, to whom he hoped to dedicate a revision of his poem, was a Sunni Muslim. There are two important implications in Ferdowsi's blatant declaration of faith in his revised *Shāhnāme* edition. First, if he were not a Shiite of profound convictions, he would not have included his declaration of faith in a work that he desperately hoped would receive patronage from a Sunni king. He could have either taken those verses out, or at the very least, tried to soften their tone. No compromise for Ferdowsi: not only does the proclamation of his Shiism exist in *both* redactions of his *Shāhnāme*, but the verses are quite blatantly presented. Therefore, because Ferdowsi kept his declaration of faith in the revised version of his poem, and because he did so in spite of the fact that he planned to offer the *Shāhnāme* to a Sunni king, he must have been a devout Shiite.

Aside from his various explicit proclamations of faith, Ferdowsi embeds a number of references to Muslim religious practices in the *Shāhnāme*, so there is no doubt about his familiarity with religious ceremony and tradition. For instance, early in the poem, he refers to the divine "tablet" of predestination (*lawh*) on which God has written the destiny of the world (i:202:571). Also various references to the Tablet and the Pen (Koran, 68:1 and 85: 22) signal the poet's familiarity with the text of the holy writ. Elsewhere, he refers to verses according to which God creates the world by commanding it to "be!" (v:562:422):

دو گیتی پدید آمد از کاف و نون چرا نه به فرمان او در، نه چون

The two worlds came to be from the letters *kāf* and *nun*
There is no arguing with his will.

There are several references to a number of other Muslim folk beliefs and practices throughout the *Shāhnāme*. For instance, using the narrator's voice, he mentions the custom of reciting the call to prayer in the ear of the newborn (viii: 243:3188-3189):





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ششم سال از آن دختِ قیصر چو ماه
یکی پورش آمد چو تابنده ماه
نبود آن زمان رسم بانگ نماز
به گوش چنان پروریده به ناز

And in the sixth year Caesar's daughter bore him
An infant like the shining moon.
It was not the custom at that time to give the call to prayers in infants' ears.

It must be stressed however, that Ferdowsi's religiosity, as one would expect from a complex man of his intellectual sophistication, was not simple-minded or straightforward. He was a conflicted man of profound religious beliefs, who like most other intellectuals of his time, did not necessarily follow all of his religion's mandates. For instance, he was, as we know from his own words, quite fond of wine and in all likelihood drank excessively. But, being a Muslim, he also felt remorseful about it.

It was the great poet and scholar, Malek al-Sho'arā' Bahār—himself an opium addict with first hand knowledge about the addictive personality—who first pointed out Ferdowsi's excessive love of wine. In a major essay published in 1934, Bahār pointed to the poet's obsessive drinking with typical subtlety and deference. Here, I only want to build on his original suggestion and make an additional point.

Being a devout Muslim, Ferdowsi felt ashamed about his over-fondness for wine and repeatedly expressed his feelings of guilt. For instance, at the conclusion of the Anushirvān story, Ferdowsi uses the narrator's voice to blame himself for indulging his appetites at a time in life when a man should be more concerned with the hereafter than with worldly pleasures. Here's Warner and Warner's translation of the passage (vii:445-446:4324-4328):

چو سالت شد ای پیر بر شست و یک	می و جام و آرام شد بی نمک
نبندد دل اندر سپنجی سـرای	خردیافته مردم پاکـرای
به گاه پس بجیدن مرگ می	چو پیراهن شعر باشد به دی
فسرده تن اندر میان گناه	روان سوی فردوس گم کرده راه
زیاران کسی ماند و چندی گذشت	تو با جام، همراه مانده به دشت





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Old man! When three score years and one have past,
Wine, cup, and crest grow savorless at last,
Yet wine for one that readieth to die
Is as a wool-coat when 'tis winterly
When body freezeth in the midst of vice,
And soul hath lost its way to Paradise,
Full many a friend hath lagged or passed away,
But in the waste the cup with thee will stay

Elsewhere, he rebukes himself for insatiably desiring wine, and wishes that he could find the will-power to stop drinking (vii:456:4450-4451):

خردگیر و از بزم و شادی بگرد	تو ای پیرفروت بی توبه مرد
روان از در توبه بر تافتی	جهان تازه شد چون قدح یافتی

O' aged, frail, and impenitent man!
Be wise and give up feasting and pleasure!
The world looks wonderful now that you took to the cup again,
And recalled your soul from the gate of repentance.

There are many other verses where the poet expresses his contrition for drinking. Now, if Ferdowsi were not a devout Muslim, he would not have felt that there was anything wrong with drinking. Our poet's remorseful musing about his drinking, therefore, is further proof of his spiritual devotion to a religion that *does* consider drinking to be a sin; and that religion is Islam. But even bad habits may have some unintended efficacy. Ferdowsi's addictive and obsessive personality, that manifested itself in his dependence on alcohol, must have also given him the drive that sustained him through the decades which he spent working on the *Shāhnāme*.

III. Did Ferdowsi "write" the Shāhnāme?

The answer to this question is more complicated than a simple yes or no. The proper response must be, "yes he did; and no, he did not." We know that there was a massive prose *Shāhnāme*, which the poet Daqiqi (d. circa 976) had begun to translate into verse before Ferdowsi took up the project. This prose *Shāhnāme* was a well known book. Many literati of the period, including the polymath Biruni (d. 1049) were familiar with





it and had referred to it in their own writings. Biruni, for example, quoted it in his *The Chronicle of Ancient Nations*, which he completed in 1001, some eight or nine years before Ferdowsi's final redaction of his *Shāhnāme* in 1010. At any rate, Daqiqi died before he could finish putting the prose *Shāhnāme* into verse, and Ferdowsi took up the task. Therefore, we know that both Ferdowsi and Daqiqi used the prose *Shāhnāme* as their source. Ferdowsi's actual contribution was to put the stories of that prose book into verse. In other words, he took an already existing book, and translated its text into poetry. Therefore, he did not personally invent any of the stories of the *Shāhnāme*. However, he was responsible for their present poetic form. Ironically, as Ferdowsi's poetic version grew in fame and reputation, people were no longer willing to copy its original prose archetype when they could have Ferdowsi's beautiful verse. Thus, Ferdowsi's masterful verse practically doomed the massive prose *Shāhnāme*, which was gradually lost to oblivion.

Ferdowsi recounts his own *Shāhnāme*'s background at several points in the poem. The most detailed description is given at the epic's beginning (i: 12-15:115-161), with a briefer account inserted at the poem's midpoint (v: 75-76:1-13). Let me quote the relevant verses of these passages together with their English translations, so you can see for yourself:

فرآوان بدو اندرون داستان	یکی نامه بود از گه باستان
ازو بهره‌یی نزد هر بخردی	پراگنده در دست هر موبدی
دلیر و بزرگ و خردمند و راد	یکی پهلوان بود دهقان نژاد
گذشته سخن‌ها همه باز جست	پژوهنده روزگار نخست
بیاورد کین نامه را گرد کرد...	ز هر کشوری موبدی سالخورد
سخن‌های شاهان و گشت جهان	بگفتند پیشش یکایک مهان
یکی نامور نامه افگند بن	چو بشنید ازیشان سپید سخن
برو آفرین از کهان و مهان	چنین یادگاری شد اندر جهان
همی خواند خواننده بر هر کسی...	چن از دفتر این داستانها بسی
سخن گفتنی خوب و طبعی روان	جوانی پیامد گشاده زبان
ازو شادمان شد دل انجمن	به شعر آرم این نامه را، گفت، من
همه ساله با بد به پیکار بود	جوانیش را خوی بد یار بود
نبود از جهان دلش یک روز شاد	بدان خوی بد جان شیرین بداد





Ferdowsi in Fact and Fancy

نهادش به سر بر یکی تیره ترگ	برو تاختن کرد ناگاه مرگ
به دست یکی بنده بر، کشته شد...	یکایک ازو بخت برگشته شد
چنان بخت بیدار او خفته ماند	برفت او و این نامه ناگفته ماند

سوی تخت شاه جهان کرد روی	دل روشن من چو بگذشت از اوی
به پیوند گفتار خویش آورم	که این نامه را دست پیش آورم
بترسیدم از گردش روزگار	بپرسیدم از هرکسی بی شمار
بباید سپردن به دیگر کسی...	مگر خود درنگم نباشد بسی
که با من توگفتی ز هم پوست بود	به شهرم یکی مهربان دوست بود
به نیکی خرامد همی پای تو	مراگفت: خوب آمد این رای تو
به پیش تو آرم نگر نغنوی	نیشته من این دفتر پهلوی
سخن گفتن پهلوانیت هست	گشاده زبان و جوانیت هست
بدین جوی نزد مهران آبروی	شو این نامه خسروان بازگوی
برافروخت این جان تاریک من	چن آورد این نامه نزدیک من
یکی مهتری بود گردن فراز	بدین نامه چون دست بردم فراز
خردمند و بیدار و روشن روان...	جوان بود و از گوهر پهلوان
که جانت سخن برگراید همی؟	مراگفت: کز من چه باید همی
به گیتی نیازت نیارم به کس...	به چیزی که باشد مرا دسترس
گرت گفته آید، به شاهان سپار	مراگفت کین نلمه شهریار
به نام شهنشاه گردن فراز	بدین نامه من دست بردم فراز

There was an ancient book
That contained many stories
Copies of it possessed by different learned men
Each of whom owned a piece.
There was a paladin, of noble birth
A man of courage, rank, wisdom, and liberality,
A seeker of ancient tales
Keen to collect the stories of the past
He gathered aged archimages of every clime,
And had them compose this book [in the following wise]:
The archimages told their legends of old,





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The stories of kings and of all that happened in the world,
When he heard the tales of these men of lore
He had them recorded in a famed book
A book that remains a memorial
Worthy of praise, by lord and commoner
Now, professional story readers
Read these tales out of the book for the people ...
There appeared a youth, well skilled in poetry
Sweet of words, and eloquent;
"I will put this book into verse," said he,
And every heart was gladdened by his intent;
But his youth was marred by vicious habits
With which he struggled day and night,
His evil ways cost him his sweet life,
Without letting him enjoy himself even for a day
Death rushed upon him unexpectedly
And placed a gloomy helmet on his head.
Fortune abandoned him at once
And he perished by the hand of a mere slave.
He departed, and this book remained untold in verse
And its revived fortune fell back into stupor.
Disappointed by [Daqiqi's death],
My heart turned to the lord of the universe;
Wondering, should I take up the book
And put it into my own verse?
I consulted more persons than I can count,
For I was fearful of the change in [my] fortune
That I may not live long enough to finish the task,
And must leave it to someone else.
I had a loving friend in town
Exceedingly close and kind.
He said: "I like your decision,
You are on the right path."
I will provide you with a written copy of this book of heroes,
But take care, not to be slack.
Of youth and eloquence you have all that anyone might wish
And your verse is heroic to boot
Go on, and versify this book of kings,
And by it, make your reputation with the great."





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When he brought this book to me,
He lit up my gloomy soul by his deed.

When I began to work on this book
There was a lord of noble lineage,
Who was quite young, a descendant of the lord [who had commissioned
the book]
He asked me, saying: "what can I provide for you,"
To help you [put this book into] verse with greater ease?
I will offer all that I can afford
So that you have need of none other."
He also said: "When you complete versifying this book,
Dedicate it to some prince."
Thus, I set myself to the task
In the name of our lofty king.

Ferdowsi's reference to his precursor, Daqiqi, and Daqiqi's 1000 verses are inserted in the middle of Goshtāsp's story in the *Shāhnāme*. Ferdowsi's remembrance of the earlier poet serves two functions. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the unfortunate Daqiqi was Ferdowsi's predecessor in the versification project; and on the other, it demonstrates how superior Ferdowsi's verse is to Daqiqi's poetry. Let's see what Ferdowsi says about this:

چنان دید گوینده یک شب به خواب	که یک جام می داشتی چون گلاب
دقیقی ز جایی پدید آمدی	بر آن جام می داستان هازدی
به فردوسی آواز دادی که می	مخور جز بر آیین کاوس کی
که شاهی گزیدی ز گیتی که بخت	بدو نازد و تاج و دیهیم و تخت
شهنشاه محمود گیرنده شهر	ز شادی به هر کس رسانیده بهر
از امروز تا سال هشتاد و پنج	بکاهدش رنج و ببالدش گنج
و زان پس به چین اندر آرد سپاه	همه مهتران برگشایند راه
نبایدش گفتن کسی را درشت	همه تاج شاهانش آمد به مش
بدین نامه گر چند بشتافتی	کنون هرچ جستی همه یافتی
ازین باره من پیش گفتم سخن	اگر باز یابی بخیلی مکن
ز گشتاسپ و ارجاسپ بیتی هزار	بگفتم، سرآمد مرا روزگار
گر آن مایه نزد شهنشاه رسد	روان من از خاک بر مه رسد
کنون من بگویم سخن کو بگفت	منم زنده، او گشت با خاک جفت





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Thus was it that one night the poet dreamed
He held a cup of wine whose fragrance seemed
Rosewater-like. Daqiqi from his stead
Appeared and, speaking of that wine-cup, said
Thus to Ferdowsi: "Quaff not save thou choose
The fashion of the day of Kaikavus.
For he that is the monarch of thy choice,
In whom crown, throne, and fortune all rejoice,
Mahmud, the king of kings and conqueror,
Who giveth all a portion of his store,
Shall from today for fourscore years and five
Behold his travail wane, his treasury thrive
Shall lead to Chin hereafter his array,
And every chief shall ope for him the way.
He will not need to speak an angry word,
All crowns will come to him with one accord.
If o'er this story then hast somewhat striven
Now all that then didst wish thou thee is given
I too told somewhat of this history,
And if thou then findest it be kind to me,
I sang a thousand couplets of Goshtāsp,
Before my day was done, and of Arjāsp,
And if my work shall reach the king of kings
My soul will soar o'er sublunary things."
So now the verses that he wrote I give,
For he is gathered to the dust; I live.
(Warners' translation)

As you can see, Ferdowsi states out front that he did not invent the stories of the *Shāhnāme*, nor did he hear them from any "oral tradition," poetic or otherwise. He worked from a literary source in which all of these stories existed in the same form and order we know today. His contribution was the incomparably artful verse into which he recast them.

IV. Was the Shāhnāme a Nationalist Response to the Arab Conquest?

This is a loaded question, and many believe that he did; but I don't think so. Ferdowsi, as we have already seen, was a devout Shiite Muslim.





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Contrary to the beliefs of some of his modern countrymen about him, he was not at all scandalized by Islam's "conquest" of his country. Regardless of this fact, many interpret Ferdowsi's composition of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* as his attempt to protect his people's ethnic identity by preserving Iran's national lore in verse. However, as we have already seen in our discussion of the Arab conquest, conversion to Islam did not threaten Iranians' ethnic and national identities. That change was limited to the religious sphere, and had nothing to do with the nation's broader cultural circumstances. The best indication that Iranian national pride was not as badly injured as is often believed is that no genre of traditional narratives about the Arab conquest was created in response to it. That is to say, if the Muslim conquest were as traumatic as some contemporary Iranians believe it to have been, it would have generated some form of anti-Arab narratives in Persian folklore. After all, other peoples who were traumatized by foreign invasion are known to have vented their resentment in their folk tradition. For instance, a rich body of epic songs about the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans continues to thrive in Eastern Europe. Similarly, there are Jewish tales that bitterly remember the Roman assault upon Biblical lands; and Spanish narratives in which the Moorish conquest of the Iberian Peninsula is commemorated. Remember the *Battle of Maldon* from our last chapter—a gloriously and heroically inaccurate account of an Anglo-Saxon defeat at Viking hands. We also have anti-Muslim tales and songs about the Muslim conquest of Indian kingdoms.⁵ By contrast, no narratives against the Arab conquest of Iran exist in Persian folklore.⁶ The only counter argument here would be to say that Ferdowsi's choice of the prose *Shāhnāmeḥ* itself, betrays his nationalist sentiments. Perhaps it does, and perhaps it does not. I don't know. What I *do* know is that Ferdowsi lived three centuries after the end of the conquest, at a time when Iran had long recovered from any negative effects of the invasion. By the time he began the *Shāhnāmeḥ's* versification, Iran had regained all of her lost opulence and splendor under the Taherids (821-871), Saffarids (867-1495), and Samanids (819-1005) dynasties. Even the Ghaznavid rulers (977-1186) who are frequently identified as Turkish by friend and foe alike, grew out of the Samanid political culture and were not only thoroughly Iranian in culture, but also represented the political and cul-





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tural continuation of Persia's pre-Islamic kings. Thus, the Arab conquest of Iran was no tragedy to Ferdowsi. It was a simple historical fact with no greater signification than the recurring rising of the sun in the east and its setting in the west.

V. Did Ferdowsi meet Mahmud?

No. I don't believe such a meeting ever took place. First, none of Mahmud's contemporaries mention Ferdowsi, even in scorn. Also, if our poet had in fact seen any of Mahmud's palaces or his courts, which according to eyewitness accounts were quite sumptuous, rest assured that he would have described them somewhere in one of his many panegyrics about Mahmud. The regal opulence of Mahmud's palaces would have been grist for any epic poet's mill, and Ferdowsi was no exception. To give you an idea of the magnificence of the Sultan's palace, let me briefly quote a contemporary ambassador's account from a visit in or around the year 1001 AD. This ambassador was sent to Mahmud by the Caliph in Baghdad, and was already used to the luxurious surroundings of that great court. In spite of this, he was quite impressed by what he saw in Mahmud's palace.

When I approached the town where the Sultan was, I encountered a vast body of his troops, too numerous to be counted, and all fitted out with the most splendid uniforms and outfits, and the finest weapons and equipment that I have ever seen... On reaching the gate of the palace, I noticed two great serpents, the biggest known of their kind, each guarding one of the halves of the gate, and held there by iron chains. I entered, and found the forecourt thronged with wild beasts, chained up on both sides in lines facing each other. I made my way through them, noting first of all lynxes in their natural state, and then panthers likewise, all in great numbers. Finally, I reached Mahmud himself, a fine figure to see, installed in his full court, in a hall richly furnished and equipped. He was seated on his throne with all the great men of state standing before him in two ranks, all in their finest clothes. ... Then he got up ready to ride to the place where the proclamation of the Caliph's message was to take place, and he ordered me to ride with him. His horse was brought to the door of the throne room, and he mounted. When he rode through the midst of those wild beasts, they all roared and rubbed their faces in the dust, abasing themselves before him





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... the soldiers shouted out, the elephants knelt down ... and the horses neighed. It was as if the Day of Resurrection were suddenly upon us, and I felt the ground tremble!⁷

Had Ferdowsi seen such splendor with his own eyes, I have no doubt that, like other poets who lavishly described their experience at the court, he too would have had something to say about it. The opulence of Mahmud's court would have been a major source of inspiration to an epic poet of Ferdowsi's prowess.

To sum up, I believe it is possible that, in his attempts to bring his poem to King Mahmud's attention, Ferdowsi may have approached the Sultan's nobles, or members of the royal family. However, we know nothing about the place, manner, or extent of his contact with them.

VI. Did Ferdowsi Compose a Satire Against Mahmud?

The evidence is inconclusive. However, I believe that he did not for the following reasons. We know from the *Shāhnāme* that our poet was sorely disappointed about failing to secure the Sultan's patronage, and his deep disappointment comes through in a number of passages. In spite of this fact, there is no convincing reason to believe that he composed a satire against the king; and the famous poem, which begins with the verse:

ایا شاه محمود کشور گشای ز کس گر ترسی، بترس از خدای

O' King Mahmud, the conqueror of realms
Fear God, if you fear none other!

is actually his. In its present form, the satire is made up of a hodgepodge of original and spurious verses. Its original verses have been culled out of their original contexts from various parts of the *Shāhnāme*, and have been combined with poorly composed lines to create the satire. Thus, it is a haphazard mixture of genuine *Shāhnāme* verses glued together with the help of inferior lines of unknown authorship. The satire's non-*Shāhnāme* verses cannot possibly be by Ferdowsi for stylistic reasons. In fact, they cannot even hail from Ferdowsi's era. To put it bluntly, a satire where all the well-written passages are ripped out of context from the *Shāhnāme*, and all the dud elements are non-*Shāhnāme* doggerel,





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is very unlikely to have come from Ferdowsi. Old and infirm he may have been; brain-damaged he was not. More importantly, no poet of Ferdowsi's power would have rummaged through his masterwork to find verses to indicate his disappointment and frustration. He would have composed new verse into which he would have poured his rage and sorrow. Therefore, the very existence of non-contextual "original" verses in the satire is proof of its spuriousness.

VII. Did Ferdowsi's Daughter Refuse the Sultan's Belated Reward?

No, for a simple reason: Ferdowsi did not *have* a daughter. We know that he had a son whose death he mourns in the verses that I have already quoted. We also know that he had a female companion—either a wife or a favorite concubine—because he says so in the introduction to the episode of Bizhan and Manizha (iii:304-305:15-21). He even mentions his personal servant, whose name may have been Ruzbeh (vi:276:9); but he never speaks of a daughter. It is unlikely that a man of Ferdowsi's sensitivity would leave an only daughter out of his life's work, when he mentions his wife, son, and even a servant. Furthermore, all of our information about this daughter comes from unreliable sources; the whole thing may be dismissed as legend.

VIII. Was Mahmud Turkish, and Did the Shāhnāme Offend Him?

One popular legend about Ferdowsi's relationship with Mahmud claims ethnic conflict as the reason for why our poet never received his desired patronage. This theory goes that, because the poet was born under Iranian Samanid rule (819-1005), he resented the passing of political authority from them to the Ghaznavid Turks. This hypothesis seeks reinforcement with the allegation that, being an anti-Iranian Turk, Mahmud despised Persia's language, literature and culture. One last claim in this legend is that Mahmud found the *Shāhnāme's* occasional anti-Turkish tone offensive. Careful scrutiny of this argument's elements exposes its fakery. Let's start with King Mahmud's ethnicity and see if he was culturally Turkish or Persian.

This legend's slight grip on reality is based on Mahmud's Turkish-born father, who was brought to Iran as a twelve-year-old slave and spent





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the rest of his life there. His father completely absorbed Iranian culture, prospered remarkably, and in the course of time married a Persian woman and established his household. Mahmud was born there in A.D. 971. So, Mahmud, born and bred in Iran from a Persian mother and a Persianized father, can hardly be called Turkish. Now, it is true, that like many Iranian Turks, he was bilingual and could fluently speak Persian as well as Turkish. However, the ability to speak these languages does not make him ethnically Persian or Turkish. There is more to ethnicity than mere linguistic ability. So, let us consider his parentage and cultural identification more closely.

Given the fact that Mahmud's mother was not only Iranian, but an aristocratic Persian woman—his maternal grandfather was the *dehqān* of Zābol—Mahmud was raised in the culture of the Iranian nobility. His father, Sebuktegin was brought to Iran at the age of twelve, and after going through the rigorous military training of those who were destined for the life of a slave-soldier, was eventually sold to the Samanid slave-general Alptegin, who was the governor of Khorāsān in north eastern Iran.⁸ Thus, cut off from his Turkish roots, the boy Sebuktegin grew to manhood in Iran, and absorbed the Persian court culture of the Samanids along the way. He rapidly rose in the ranks, was later freed, and married the daughter of the Persian governor of the city of Zābol. By this time, he was the son-in-law to an old aristocratic Persian family that traced its roots to the nobility of pre-Islamic Persia. The implications from all of these historically verifiable facts are that Sebuktegin's son, Mahmud, was neither a slave's son—his father was freed before marrying his mother—nor a foreign Turkish ruler that harbored any animosity toward Persian culture. He was the son of a noble Persian lady with far more noble bloodlines than any of Iran's more recent rulers, including the Pahlavis. Furthermore, having been raised in the bosom of his Persian mother who transmitted her own culture and language to him, he could *not* possibly be considered a Turk in any culturally accepted sense of that word.⁹

What governs our judgment about the ethnicity of rulers like Mahmud is pure prejudice. But at its core, much of this prejudice is not directed at *their* ethnicity *per se*; it is rather a passive form of chauvinism directed against the feminine. Most of us, men as well as women, liberals as well as





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conservatives, are culturally programmed to neglect the feminine's role in history. In most people's minds, the cultural identity of historical or politically influential persons is determined by their fathers. It is as though we forget that kings and other leaders have mothers as well. A case in point is President Barak Obama; a man born of a black father and a white mother, but primarily raised by his white grandmother. Biologically, of course, he is no more black than he is white. Yet, he is called the first "black president" of the United States by consensus. Here's a question: is Obama black because his Kenyan father was black? Were the genes that were contributed by his mother made of smaller DNA molecules than the ones provided by his father? We know that Mr. Obama Sr. was also a member of the Luo ethnic group, he was a Muslim, and a Kenyan. Is the president of the United States considered to be any of these things by anyone except the radical right's most tweaked wing nuts? Most agree that he is not. However, most have no difficulty considering him racially "black" only because his father was black. Much of this, of course, is driven according to the precepts of Western civilization that places "race" at the center of all things. But the fact is that Barak Obama's white mother, his white grandmother, and the white culture imparted to him by these women, are all marginalized in favor of his absentee father's race.

A similar situation exists in Mahmud's case. But, because Iranian worldview is not a prisoner of "race," in Mahmud's case it is not his "race" but his *ethnicity* that assumes center stage. Iranians are not as "race conscious" as the Americans. What is important to us is not race, but "ethnicity."¹⁰ Nonetheless, beset by the same anti-feminine prejudices, like the Americans who dub a President who is culturally white, "black" only because his father was black, we turn the culturally Iranian Mahmud into a "Turk" only because his father was born in Turkestan. We do this with the help of a healthy dose of male chauvinism that allows us the assumption that children are what their fathers are. We marginalize, disregard, or otherwise conceal Mahmud's Iranian mother, and all the other nurturing Persian women that must have peopled his childhood. We pretend that all these women had nothing to do with his birth, upbringing, and formative years, and blinded by prejudice pretend that women do not count at all in historical analysis. To sum up, Mahmud was culturally Persian





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for the same reason that some of you, the American born children of immigrant Persian fathers and American mothers are culturally American. Many of you do not even speak Persian, and some of you have never even been to Iran. Mahmud was like you, and could speak Persian that was his mother tongue, as well as Turkish, which was not. Having gone through the traditional education of upper-class Persian children, there is ample evidence that he had also learned classical Arabic, and could at the very least, read and understand it well.

Mahmud's successors had a similar childhood and shared their father's Persian ethnic identity. His several wives bore him a number of children including at least three sons. The mother of his successor Mas'ud I (r. 1031-1041), was a princess of the ancient Iranian house of Farighun that traced its lineage to the nobility of Pre-Islamic Iran. The Farighunids were also related to the Samanid kings by marriage.¹¹ Therefore, neither Mahmud nor any of his successors could dislike Ferdowsi or the *Shāhnāme* for ethnic reasons, because they shared the poet's ethnic identity.

Let us now consider the question of whether or not the Sultan was offended by the fiercely pro-Persian tone of the *Shāhnāme* that some have considered "anti-Turkish." I don't believe anything in the tone or wording of Ferdowsi's epic could offend Mahmud, because the sentiments expressed in this book were Mahmud's own feelings. As far as the alleged anti-Turkish tone of some episodes is concerned, many of the Sultan's court poets routinely expressed the idea that the Turanian Turks were Iran's—and therefore, Mahmud's—enemies. That idea was nothing new in Ghaznavid court poetry. Consider the following example from a panegyric to Mahmud by the poet, Farrokhi (d. 1037 AD):

درین معنی مثل بسیار زد لقمان و جز لقمان	ز دشمن دوستی ناید، اگر چه دوستی جوید
پس از چندین بالا آمد ز ایران بر سر توران	ز ایرانی چگونه شاد خواهد بود تورانی
از آن خونها کزیشان ریخت تیغ رستم دستان	هنوز از بازجویی در زمینشان چشمه هایابی
حدیث رستم دستان یکی بود از هزار افسان...	بجای آنکه تو کردی بر ایشان در کتر شاها
در آن شیون نکرد دستند خاتونان ترکستان...	به ترکسان سرائی نیست کز شمشیر تو صدره

Enemies will not be friends, even when they seek to befriend us
Much have the wise said about this





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How can Turks have good will toward Iranians,
After so many blows that rained upon their heads from Iran?
Even now if one searches their land, one will find springs
Of blood that Rostam's blade made flow from their bodies
Compared to what you did to them in the battle of Katar sire!
Stories of Rostam seem as silly tales ...
There is no house in Turkestan in which
The women have not bitterly keened the slaughter of your blade.¹²

I can easily present hundreds of such examples culled from the divans of Mahmud's court poets, who were paid by him to produce such verses, as proof that he could not dislike the *Shāhnāmeḥ* for its supposedly anti-Turkish tone. In fact, I reject the very idea that there is anything "anti-Turkish" in the *Shāhnāmeḥ* at all. After all, the book was quite highly valued by the Ottoman Sultans, who ruled the last great Turkish empire.

IX. Did Mahmud Dislike Ferdowsi for Religious Reasons?

Those who must find some form of hostility between Mahmud and Ferdowsi sometime discover what they seek in the presumed tension between the Sunni Sultan and the Shiite poet. They allege that the king disliked Ferdowsi for religious reasons. According to the "religious tension" scenario, the reason Mahmud shunned the poet was that he disliked Ferdowsi's devotion to Shiism. This idea too falls apart as soon as it is subjected to the slightest scrutiny. Mahmud was a major patron of poetry and did not care about the religious proclivities of the poets whom he sponsored at all. For instance, the great Shiite poet, Ghazā'eri of Rey (d. 1036) was lavishly supported by the king. After receiving a great deal of money from Mahmud in reward for a poem that he had composed in his praise, Ghazā'eri thanked the Sultan in the following words:

I received two sacks of gold after the victory over Narayan
Soon will I be given a hundred sacs and more when Antioch is conquered.¹³

The poet goes on to beg the king to stop showering him with gifts.¹⁴ In fact Ghazā'eri was not shy about fronting his religious sentiments even in panegyrics that were addressed to Mahmud. Praising the family of the





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prophet is a typically Shiite practice, and Ghazā'eri did not hesitate to express his religious sentiments in verse. He ends one of his laudatory poems addressed to the king, with an allusion to his own Shiism, apparently without fear of evoking his patron's displeasure:

ثناءِ جودِ تو گسترده باد گردِ جهان چنان کجا صلواتِ رسول باشد و آل

May the praise for your generosity be spread far and wide
As is the custom of blessing the Prophet and **his family**.¹⁵

Moreover, we know from contemporary sources that King Mahmud arranged several marriages between Shiite princes of various realms with a number of his daughters and sisters. In view of these facts, it is difficult to charge Mahmud with being a fierce Sunni who hated Ferdowsi because of the poet's Shiism. Indeed, I believe that the whole idea of Sunni-Shiite enmity was considered distasteful and abhorrent to the elite of the Ghaznavid period.¹⁶

X. Did Ferdowsi Avoid Using Arabic Words in his Verse?

No. Ferdowsi's poem has about the same percentage of Arabic loan words as any book of its kind that was composed at the time. Arabic vocabulary is found in some of the *Shāhnāme*'s best lines, and what's more, some of the words most commonly used in the poem, such as the word for weapons (*salih*), are Arabic loan words into Persian. A lot of the resentment against Arabs and Islam that is attributed to Ferdowsi is nothing but modern Iranians' prejudices, projected back unto their national poet.

Now that we know the general outlines of our national poet's life and times, let's move on to the study of what the *Shāhnāme* actually says, and why it remains the most important text of our culture a thousand years after the day Ferdowsi put pen to paper for the first time.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For a catalogue of tales about Ferdowsi in classical Persian see:
جلال متینی. "فردوسی در هاله ای از افسانه ها"، مجلهء دانشکدهء ادبیات و علوم انسانی دانشگاه فردوسی، ج ۱۴، بهار ۱۳۵۷، ش ۱، صص ۳۲-۱.
- 2 Edward G. Browne. *Revised Translation of the Chahār Maqāla: ("Four Discourses") of Nizāmi-i*





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Arīdi of Samarqand, followed by an Abridged Translation of Mirzā Muhammad's Notes to the Persian Text (London: Printed by the Cambridge University Press for the Trustees of the E. J. W. Gibb Memorial & Published by Messrs. Luzac & Co., 1921).

- 3 Browne, *Literary History*, vol.2, pp.136-7.
- 4 احمد بن عمر بن علی نظامی عروضی سمرقندی. چهارمقاله، طبق نسخه‌ای که به سعی و اهتمام و تصحیح مرحوم محمد قزوینی به سال ۱۳۲۷ هجری قمری در قاهره چاپ شده با تصحیح مجدد و شرح لغات و عبارات و توضیح نکات ادبی به ضمیمه تعلیقات چهارمقاله به قلم علامه قزوینی و گروهی از فاضلان بنام. به کوشش محمد معین (چاپ سوم، تهران: زوآر، ۱۳۸۵)، صص ۸۳-۷۵.
- 5 For references see Heda Jason, *Motif, Type and Genre: A Manual for Compilation of Indices and A Bibliography of Indices and Indexing*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 2000 (FF Communications no.273), pp.170 (item *79), 177 (item *120), 186 (item *174), 232 (item 196).
- 6 The few lines in the *Shāhnāmah* in which an Iranian general forecasts the fate of his country after the Muslim invasion hardly counters this fact because that story is even found in Arabic historical and literary traditions that date from a time long before Ferdowsi. It, in other words, does not belong to Persian folklore *per se*. I have discussed this in some detail. See: محمود امیدسالار، "ز شیر شتر خوردن و سوسمار" ایرانشناسی، ج ۱۳، ۲۰۰۲، صص ۷۶-۷۳.
- 7 For the full translation and commentary about this ambassador's visit to the court of Mahmud, see C. E. Bosworth, "An Embassy to Mahmud of Ghazna Recorded in Qadi Ibn az-Zubayr's *Kitāb adh-dhakhā'ir wa'l-tuhaf*," in JAOS 85(1965)3:404-407. Bosworth's translation of the Arabic *tinnāyin*, "two dragons," is inaccurate. I have changed it to "two serpents." Also, the royal practice of keeping beasts such as panthers, lions, etc., that were trained for hunting and other purposes is quite ancient in Iran. See Bosworth's notes pp.406-407.
- 8 نظام الملک، سیرالملوک (سیاست نامه)، به اهتمام هیوبرت دارک، چاپ سوم (تهران: شرکت انتشارات علمی و فرهنگی، ۱۳۷۲)، ص ۱۴۲
- 9 In his *Siyāsāt Nāmāh*, Nezām al-Molk writes:
 سبکتگین... دختر رئیس زاوولستان را بزنی کرد و محمود را ازین سبب زاولی گویند. نگاه کنید به: نظام الملک. سیاستنامه. با تصحیح مجدد و تعلیقات و مقدمه به کوشش مرتضی مدرسی (تهران: زوآر ۲۵۳۷)، ص ۱۳۸.
 برای مدارک دیگر درین خصوص نگاه کنید به: امیدسالار، محمود، "شاهنامه فردوسی و هویت فرهنگی محمود غزنوی"، در جستارهای شاهنامه شناسی و مباحث ادبی، پژوهش و نگارش محمود امیدسالار (تهران: بنیاد موقوفات دکتر محمود افشار، ۱۳۸۱)، صص ۲۶۱-۲۴۳؛ حمدالله مستوفی قزوینی، تاریخ گزیده، به تصحیح عبدالحسین نوائی، چاپ دوم (تهران: امیرکبیر، ۱۳۶۲)، ص ۳۹۱: "مادرش [یعنی مادر محمود] دختر رئیس زاوول بود و او را بدین سبب زاولی خواندند."
- 10 Ethnicity is a thorny problem, which I will not discuss here in order to avoid turning a book for general readers into a study that would fall outside their interests.
- 11 Nāzīm, Muhammad. *The Life and Times of Sultān Mahmud of Ghazna* (Lahore: Khalil & Co. 1973), p.33. Beyhaqi (p.252) refers to the governor of Gozganān, Abu al-Hāreth-e Farighun, as: "Mahmud's father in law" (خسر سلطان محمود) See also:
 ابوالشرف ناصح بن ظفر جرفادقانی، ترجمه تاریخ یمینی. به اهتمام جعفر شعار (چاپ سوم، تهران: انتشارات علمی و فرهنگی، ۱۳۷۳)، صص ۲۹۵-۲۹۴:
 ولایت جوزجان در مدت ملک آل سامان، آل فریغون را بود ابا عن جد... و ابوالخارث احمد بن محمد غره دلت و جمال جملت و طراز حلت ایشان بود... و امیر ناصرالدین [یعنی سبکتگین] کریمه ای از کرایم او از بهر پسر خود خواسته بود و او نیز درزی یتیم از بحر جلال ناصرالدین از بهر پسر خویش ابونصر حاصل کرده.
 نیز نگاه کنید به تاریخ سیستان، بتصحیح ملک الشعراء بهار (چاپ دوم، تهران: مروی)، ص ۲۵۱ حاشیه ۳.





Ferdowsi in Fact and Fancy

- 12 فرخی. دیوان حکیم فرخی سیستانی. بتصحیح محمد دبیرسیاقی (چاپ سوم، تهران: زوار، ۱۳۶۳)، صص ۲۵۶-۲۵۷
- 13 به نقل از عنصری. دیوان استاد عنصری بلخی. به کوشش محمد دبیرسیاقی (چاپ دوم، تهران: سنائی، ۱۳۶۳)، ص ۱۷۹

دو بدره زر بگرفتم به فتح نارائن به فتح رومیه صد بدره گیرم و خرطال

- 14 همان صص ۱۷۹-۱۷۴، ۱۹۲-۱۸۹

In another qasida, the poet responds to 'Onsori's critique of his verse by emphasizing Mahmud's generosity once again, pp.189-192.

- 15 Loc. cit., p.192.

- 16 See for instance the extensive discussion of the subject in:

نصیرالدین ابوالرشید عبدالجلیل قزوینی رازی. نقض. معروف به بعضی مطالب التواصب فی نقض "بعض فضائح الروافض" نوشته شده در حدود ۵۶۰ هجری قمری. بتصحیح استاد فقیه میرجلال الدین محدث. چاپ دوم با تجدید نظر علی محدث (تهران: سلسله انتشارات آثار ملی، ۱۳۵۸/۱۹۷۹)، صص ۲۶۲-۲۶۱: عجیب است که این نصیحت و قول بزرگان دین که بخواجهء نوسنی رسیده است که با رافضیان صحبت نشاید کردن و بر ایشان اعتماد نباید کردن، پنداری این سخن بهارون الرشید و بمامون خلیفه نرسیده بود تا بمشورت علی یقطین و فضل بن سهل ذوالریاستین چندانی اعتماد کرده بودند در ترتیب خلافت و امیرالمؤمنینی و این خبر پنداری به سلطان ملکشاه نرسیده بود تا دختر خود را خاتون سلقم را باصفهبد علی شیعی میداد و بر مجدالملک قمی اعتماد کرده بود، و بسطان برکیارق نرسیده بود تا برگفت و مشورت رئیس ابواسحاق مشکوی اعتماد کرده بود، و این خبر علماء سنت با سلطان سنجر نگفته بودند ... تا او بر شرف بوظاهر وزیر قمی و بر معین الدین ابونصر کاشی اعتماد کرده بود، و این خبر پنداری بنظام الملک ابوعلی الحسن ابن علی بن اسحاق نرسیده بود که سر همه سنیان بود تا بشفاعت دختر را بیسر سید مرتضی قمی میداد و دختر امیر شرفشاه جعفری را برای پسرش امیر عمر میخواست و سلطان مسعود ازین سخن بیگانه بوده تا که وقتی دختر ملک رئیس صدقه شاعی میخواست و وقتی دختر سلطان محمود را بشاه رستم علی بن شهریار میداد، پنداری که خلفا و سلاطین و امرا و وزرای عالم همه جاهل بودند.





Chapter 7



A Work of Art, A Work of Identity

When the flush of a new-born sun fell first on Eden's green and gold,
Our father Adam sat under the Tree and scratched with a stick in the mould;
And the first rude sketch that the world had seen was joy to his mighty heart,
Till the Devil whispered behind the leaves, "It's pretty, but is it Art?"¹
(Rudyard Kipling 1865 – 1936)

In previous chapters, I tried to bring out basic facts, clear away legends, and outline the rudimentary historic and cultural contexts that anyone who wants to really understand Ferdowsi and his poem should know. We have covered the general history of Iran's language and culture insofar as they relate to the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. We have also learned something about the life of the artist who created it. In this chapter, I would like to turn to the poem as a work of art, and draw your attention to how it is put together, what it aims to communicate, and why it has never lost its grip on the Persian soul since its creation over a millennium ago.

In his *al-Mathal al-sā'ir fī adab al-kātib wa-al-shā'ir* (*The Current Dicta Concerning the Ways of Authors and Poets*), the great Arab critic and literary theorist, Diyā' al-Din ibn al-Athir (1163-1239) compares the *Shāhnāmeḥ's* importance as a standard of literary excellence in Persian to the Koran as the absolute standard of eloquence in Arabic. He points out that unlike the Arabs who have not produced long literary narratives





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in verse, Persian poets are skilled in composing such poetry, and what's more, they can do so in consistently excellent couplets:

Their poets can versify a whole book about [their] stories and legends quite eloquently in their national language; just as Ferdowsi has done in the versification of [his] famous *Shāhnāmeḥ*. This is a book of [some] sixty-thousand couples, which contains the history of Iranians; and it is [like] the Persians' Koran. All the eloquent Iranians unanimously believe that there is no book of greater expressiveness in their language. In spite of Arabic language's vast [vocabulary] and its many artful aspects, and despite [the fact] that compared to it, Persian is like a mere drop before the sea, A book such as [the *Shāhnāmeḥ*] does not exist in the Arabic language.²

Ibn al-Athir was the scion of a Muslim family of scholastic distinction. One of his two elder brothers, Majd al-Din (d. 1210), was a prominent scholar of Prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), and the other, ʿIzz al-Din (d.1233), is known for his compendious history of the world. As a devout Muslim, Ibn al-Athir did not mean to equate the *Shāhnāmeḥ* with the Koran in canonicity, nor did he mean to say that the poem was considered sacred in Iran. He meant instead to compare the two books as standards of literary excellence in their respective linguistic milieus. He believed that as *the* standard of literary excellence in Persian, Ferdowsi's poem is comparable to the Koran as *the* standard of literary excellence in Arabic. Keeping this important point in mind, let's proceed with evaluating the *Shāhnāmeḥ* as a work of art.

We know that Ferdowsi's poem is a verse rendition of a pre-existing prose *Shāhnāmeḥ* that was compiled when Ferdowsi was still a teenager, in 957. Like all major literary works of the time, that prose *Shāhnāmeḥ* was carefully constructed. It had a definite literary structure, and followed an internal narrative logic; its various episodes were put together according to a plan that gave it coherence and artistic unity.³ When Ferdowsi chose to versify that prose epic, he received a text that was already well-structured and artistically unified, and could utilize his archetype's structured narrative without adding or subtracting from it. In this respect, his approach was fundamentally different from Homer, the medieval troubadours, and other oral poets of the world's various epic traditions. Ferdowsi was a well-





educated and technically sophisticated poet, who like Virgil, was *versifying* a literary work of art. Therefore, if he must be compared with a European epic poet at all, then Virgil—the Roman Epic Poet who adapted and versified existing texts—is a more appropriate candidate for this comparison than Homer—who worked strictly in an oral medium. Calling Ferdowsi “the Persian Virgil” would make better sense than referring to him as “the Persian Homer.” The crucial point to keep in mind in all this is that, with the exception of his personal musings, *absolutely* everything in Ferdowsi’s poem existed in his personal copy of the prose *Shāhnāmeḥ*. However, since we don’t know any thing about the quality of his personal copy, it is certainly possible that his narrative may have deviated from the standard text of his prose archetype because of flaws in his copy. Remember, we are talking about an era *long* before any printing press existed; *all* books had to be hand-copied, and every time a book was copied a number of copying errors inevitably occurred. Under these circumstances a “definitive edition” of any work was more-or-less impossible to make. Thus, there may have been various textual corruptions, interpolations, or lacuna in the manuscript from which Ferdowsi worked. But such textual variation among manuscripts of classical Persian texts is normal and may not be interpreted as proof of our poet’s dependence on either a “poetic oral tradition” or especially the illusive academic concept of *mouvance*.⁴

Traditionally, scholars have divided the *Shāhnāmeḥ*’s narrative into three distinct parts: the mythological, the legendary, and the historical. The divisions are introduced for ease of reference and for facilitating study. Nothing in the *Shāhnāmeḥ* inherently confirms this tripartite division. However, since it has proved to be generally convenient, we shall go along with it in this chapter.

I. In the Beginning Were Giants and Dragons:

The *Shāhnāmeḥ* begins with the story of primordial kings. These are rulers who are also culture-heroes. That is, aside from being Iran’s *political* leaders, they also father many of the arts, crafts, and customs that we take for granted. For instance, they invent agriculture, animal husbandry, cloth-making, metalwork, and medicine. One of them learns the art of writing from a host of demons that he defeats, and in turn, teaches the art to man-





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kind. These kings also order human society into classes, and assign different functions to each group. They rule over men, fairies, and animals, and are opposed by the Devil and his host of demons and sorcerers. All of these primordial kings are endowed with magical powers that they use to battle their demonic adversaries. The first king is called Kayumart, but his name is usually corrupted to Kayumars in most manuscripts. The last of them is Fereydun, and their dynasty is called the *pishdād*, or “primordial” dynasty. That translation isn’t quite accurate, but it will do for our purposes.

During the rule of primordial kings, the realms of good and evil are completely separate. Men and their allies—animals and fairies—fight demons and their associates—witches and noxious creatures. Kings rule with justice, wisdom, and piety; for this reason, they are endowed with a magical power that helps maintain order in their realm. The most powerful of these kings, Jamshid (also called Jam), manages to subdue all demons and rules over the whole world for centuries. At the end, Jamshid grows so powerful that he even banishes death from his realm. But his great success leads to blasphemous hubris, and he demands to be worshiped by his subjects as god. Of course, as soon as he claims divinity, his royal glory (*farr*) leaves him and his realm falls into chaos. The land fills with rebellious nobles, each claiming kingship and all fighting with Jamshid and one another. Finally, they grow tired of chaos and ask Zakhāk, the Arab king, to enter Iran and take over the throne. It is crucial to understand, contrary to the belief of those who have not read the *Shāhnāme*, that Zakhāk does not invade Iran. He comes to the country *at the invitation of Iranian nobles*, who voluntarily give him ruling power because they believe that only Zakhāk can rescue them from infighting and chaos. The poem is quite specific about this point (i:51:170-176):

پدید آمد از هر سوی خسروی	یکی نامجویی به هر پهلوی
سپه کرده و جنگ را ساخته	دل از مهر جمشید پرداخته
یکایک بیامد از ایران سپاه	سوی تازیان برگرفتند راه
شنیدند کانجاییکی مهترست	پراز هول شاه اژدها پیکرست
سواران ایران همه شاه جوی	نهادند یکسر به ضحاک روی
به شاهی برو آفرین خواندند	ورا شاه ایران زمین خواندند
مر آن اژدها فش بیامد چو باد	به ایران زمین، تاج بر سر نهاد





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Pretenders appeared in every direction
A seeker of fame in every realm.
They levied troops and prepared for war
And purged their hearts from loyalty to Jamshid
The Iranian host gathered
And set forth for the land of the Arabs,
For they had heard that there is a lord there -
A fearsome dragon-bodied king.
Thus the lords of Iran seeking a [new] monarch
All went to Zakhāk,
They saluted him as king
And recognized him as king of Iran.
The dragon-king came quickly,
And donned the crown in the land of Iran

This marks an important transition in the *Shāhnāme*'s narrative, because the clear separation of good and evil ends at this point. Evil is invited in by the Iranians, who suffer the consequences of their action. However, the scene has greater symbolic significance; to understand it, we have to discuss Zakhāk's background and career.

The Arab prince Zakhāk, whom the Iranian nobles invite to take over the throne of their country, has an interesting story of his own in the *Shāhnāme*. He did not begin life as a dragon-king, but rather as the human son of a pious ruler in the land of the Arabs. One day the Devil appeared to him, and enticed him to kill his father and take over the throne. Although Zakhāk did not personally take part in the murder, he did conspire with Satan in the assassination. But the devil had further plans for the ambitious and gullible young nobleman. He appeared to Zakhāk again, this time in the guise of a skilled chef, and gained the office of royal cook, preparing many fine dishes for the new king. But because the people were vegetarian in those days, the devil devised a plan to train Zakhāk to become a carnivore. He did so in order to gradually transform his prey into a fierce and violent man. The *Shāhnāme*'s text makes that very clear (i:49:133):

به خورش بیورد برسان شیر بدان تا کند پادشاه را دلیر





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He nurtured him on blood like lions
In order to make the king fierce.

The Devil begins by feeding the king on dishes made from egg-yolk, and gradually trains his pallet to enjoy poultry, lamb, and finally beef. Zakhāk is quite pleased with his new chef's services, and offers to reward him. But the Devil refuses all rewards, and only asks to be allowed the honor of kissing the king's two shoulders. Zakhāk grants his wish, the Devil kisses the monarch's shoulders and disappears. Almost immediately, two black serpents grow out of where the Devil's lips had touched Zakhāk's shoulders, thus transforming him into a three-headed monster.⁵ Understandably distressed by this development, Zakhāk tries cutting the snakes off his shoulders, but they grow back again and continue to torment him in spite of the court doctors' best efforts to remedy the situation. The Devil appears again, this time in the guise of a physician, and advises the king to calm his serpents by feeding them human brains. Zakhāk is now totally in the Devil's grip: every day, he slays two young men and feeds their brains to his serpentine heads.

What happens to Zakhāk in this story is symbolically important. It is an important development in the *Shāhnāme*'s narrative structure, that results in leading the poem in a certain direction. Two complementary events have taken place in this episode. First, a vegetarian king has been transformed, not just into a carnivore, but into a cannibal through a process of gradual change in his diet. His vegetarian diet has been gradually changed to include eggs, then poultry, and finally meat. In the next stage, this now carnivorous king is transformed into a monstrous cannibal who kills innocent humans to feed his two serpentine heads. Zakhāk's ferocity is literally fed to him; he internalizes it by eating his way to it.

A parallel process of internalizing evil takes place in the country's political life.⁶ All of the earlier kings, including Jam until his fall, were purely good. But their enemies, and their country's antagonists were all evil and generally existed outside the kingdom. All evil, in other words, is externalized during the reign of the primordial kings. However, the fact that Iranians invite the alien monster Zakhāk to come into their homeland and take over their throne amounts to an internalization of evil. Like Zakhāk himself, who had internalized fierceness and cannibalism, the





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Iranians internalize evil by voluntarily letting the dragon-king into their country and empower him to rule over them. Zakhāk's barbarous evil was the forbidden fruit, and the Iranian nobility chose to eat it. Iranians' loss of innocence is enacted and objectified in the story of Fereydun, the last primordial king.

Fereydun is Zakhāk's challenger, and manages to capture him after a series of adventures. However, when he is about to kill the monster, an angel of the lord appears and orders that Zakhāk is not to be killed, but chained underground in a cave beneath Mount Damāvand, the snow-capped peak which is still visible from northern Tehran. Although the reason Fereydun is stopped from killing Zakhāk does not appear in the *Shāhnāmah*, it is stated in our Middle Persian sources. So many noxious creatures were contained inside the dragon-king that piercing his hide would release enough demonic vermin to fill the earth.⁷ Using this information, I argued more than twenty years ago, that Zakhāk represents all of our instinctive and tabooed impulses that are kept in check by our ego-defenses. He is, in Freudian parlance, our Id; and in our own culture's terms, our carnal aspect (*nafs-e amāra*). That is why he cannot be killed, but may only be chained and put away in a subterranean cave that represents the recesses of the unconscious mind.⁸ I have found no reason to change my mind about this interpretation. Before leaving Zakhāk in his cavernous solitude, let me make one final point about him as a political symbol in the life of our country.

Zakhāk is the quintessential symbol of tyranny and oppression in Persian literature and folklore. Many oppressive kings and cruel tyrants have been called Zakhāk in Persian literary tradition. Knowing this, when the allies were trying to influence Iranian public opinion and turn it against the axis powers during the Second World War, they used the Zakhāk story for propaganda purposes. They produced numerous posters and postcards, which depicted Hitler as Zakhāk and his Japanese and Italian axis partners as the serpents on his shoulders. The images were created by the Egyptian born political cartoonist Kem (Kimon Evan Marengo 1907-1988) who produced a number of other similar pieces for the British Ministry of Information during the war. The idea behind the illustrations was suggested by the great Iranian scholar, Mojtaba Minovi (1903-





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1976), who in a letter dated January 4, 1942 suggested it to the English orientalist, Arthur J. Arberry (1905-1969) in response to Arberry's inquiry about the subject. The posters were prepared between March and October of 1942, and the booklet of five postcards was timed to coincide with the Tehran Conference of November 28 and December 2nd, 1943 in which Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin took part.⁹



Back to our story: Fereydun rules justly and wisely, towards the end of his life he divides his kingdom among three sons. He gives Iran, which is the best part, to his youngest son Iraj, the eastern part of his empire to his eldest, Tur, after whom it comes to be known as Turān, and the western lands to his middle son, Salm. Iraj's brothers, however, feel cheated, kill their younger brother, and send his head to Fereydun. Enraged by this cruel act of fratricide, the old king charges Iraj's grandson, Manuchehr, with the duty of avenging Iraj's murder. Manuchehr goes to war against his great uncles and kills them after a series of bloody battles. Following the death of his three sons, Fereydun places Manuchehr on the throne, and dies.





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The process that internalized evil is now complete. At one time, all evil resided in demons who were completely alien to Iran and her pious primordial rulers. Then, with Jamshid's blasphemous behavior and the Persian nobles' inviting Zahhāk, the monstrous dragon-king, in to rule their country, evil gradually became localized. Persians' internalization of evil reached its culmination in the fratricide committed by Fereydun's two sons.

II. A Time of Heroes:

Fereydun's reign marks a transitional stage in the poem's narrative. It mediates between the *Shāhnāme*'s mythical and legendary sections; his death marks the epic's passing from a time of demigods and culture-heroes to one of purely human rulers, many of whom are marred by all manner of moral frailties and failures. Evil is no longer external to Iran; it originates from within. But oddly enough, it also humanizes the poem and transforms it from a tale of demigods and demons to a story of fallible and flawed men.

Heroic epics, especially national epics, must be centered on human protagonists, because gods are immortal and stateless. They need not be brave because, unlike men, they cannot be harmed, and thus their deeds are not heroic. Also, they don't valiantly face danger for their homeland, because as cosmic beings, they don't have homelands. That leaves the double burden of bravery and sacrifice for men to bear. Therefore, heroic epics, by definition, are anthropocentric and tend to drive the mythological to the periphery. The *Shāhnāme* is no exception. Its human heroes are imperfect; their fallibility draws us in and helps us identify with them. Beginning with the reign of Manuchehr, the poem dramatically focuses on purely human heroes, and because of this grows richer in artistic and symbolic content.

I have already mentioned that the epic's narrative is not disjointed at all; that, contrary to conventional wisdom, every one of its episodes connects to the stories before and after with an undeniable logic that reinforces the symbolic contents of them all, while underscoring the artistic unity of the whole poem. Let me add by way of explanation that many *Shāhnāme* scholars believe that Ferdowsi may have grafted exter-





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nal stories to the narrative of his prose archetype. The left believes that he adopted these extra tales from contemporary oral tradition—that is, from mass culture—and grafted them to the narrative of the prose archetype he was versifying. Others suppose that he incorporated certain tales from the existing textual tradition of his time. No matter what the source, both groups agree that a number of *Shāhnāme* tales seem out of place or sloppily sequenced in the body of the poem. This alleged incongruity implies that these tales were not in Ferdowsi's original prose archetype. A small but vociferous faction of American scholars have even conjured an extreme theory: that Ferdowsi lied about having had a prose archetype at all, and that he exclusively relied on a "poetic oral tradition."

None of these views make any sense. Rather than betraying an incongruity in Ferdowsi's poem, they disclose a certain tendency towards under-analysis, scholastic sloppiness and ideology-based fantasizing in the work of those who espouse them.

Ferdowsi is conscious of the artistic unity and intricate narrative structure of his poem; he clearly communicates this to his readers at the great epic's beginning (i:12:113-114):

تو این را دروغ و فسانه مدان	به یکسان روشن زمانه مدان
ازو هرچه اندر خورد با خرد	دگر بر ره رمز معنی برد

Think this [narrative] not lies or mere stories
Think not the world to have been always in one stay.
All of it [i.e., the *Shāhnāme*] either accords with sense
Or makes sense symbolically (*bar rah-e ramz*)

He reiterates the idea again in the exordium of one of the more fantastic episodes of his poem during which the hero Rostam slays the demon Akvān (iii:289:17-18):

خردمند کین داستان بشنود	به دانش گراید، بدین نگرود
ولیکن چو معنیش یادآوری	شود رام و کوتاه کند داوری

The wise man who hears this story
Is first repelled by it
But when he contemplates its [symbolic] sense
He is appeased and ceases to judge [it harshly]





Let me demonstrate my point by briefly discussing two of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* tales that many believe are secondary additions to the poem. These are the story of Forud, and the tale of Rostam's fight with the demon Akvān.

III. From Fratricide to Legitimacy: The Story of Forud

Recognizing the narrative context of *Shāhnāmeḥ* stories is crucial for understanding their meaning, and their relationship to the epic's narrative structure. Without this understanding, it would be virtually impossible to decode these stories or to comprehend the internal logic of the poem as a whole. So let me give you the context of Forud's story before attempting to tell you my reading of it.

Like his younger brother Kaykhosrow, Forud is the son of Iran's crown prince, Siyāvosh, from a Turanian mother. According to the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, Siyāvosh has a disagreement with his father, King Kaykāvus, and voluntarily exiles himself to Turān. There, he first marries Jarirah, the daughter of the foremost Turanian aristocrat, Pirān, who is also chief advisor to the Turanian king, Afrāsiyāb. Forud is born from this union. Later, Siyāvosh also marries Afrāsiyāb's own daughter, princess Farigis (corrupted to Farangis in many manuscripts). Then, after Siyāvosh is killed by Afrāsiyāb, Farigis gives birth to his second son, prince Kaykhosrow. All this means that Forud, as Siyāvosh's eldest son by a noble Turanian lady, is first in line for Iran's throne.

However, it is Kaykhosrow who returns to Iran and is crowned king. Kaykhosrow's ascension is a turbulent process. When the young prince escapes his Turanian home and comes to Iran, his grandfather Kaykāvus wishes to appoint him his viceroy. However, a powerful group of Iranian lords, headed by the impetuous and dim-witted prince Tus, strongly object to the king's choice because they fear that, as Afrāsiyāb's grandson, Kaykhosrow might have divided loyalties. They argue that since Iranians should fight Afrāsiyāb in order to avenge the murder of Siyāvosh, they need to choose a leader who is purely Persian and unlikely to be moved by blood ties to Afrāsiyāb and to the land of Turān.

Another powerful aristocratic faction, headed by the hero Rostam, his





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old and wise father Zāl, and a clan led by the warlord Gudarz, strongly support Kaykhosrow. As a result, the court aristocracy is split down the middle over the question of Kaykhosrow's legitimacy, and things get so hot that some heroes reach for their weapons and Iran teeters at the edge of civil war. But cooler heads prevail; they all agree to let Kaykhosrow prove his legitimacy in the eyes of God. To establish the truth of his claim, the prince must conquer a magical fortress full of demons and witches. Kaykhosrow succeeds, and returns triumphant to assume the reins of power as his grandfather's viceroy. Many Iranian nobles, however, remain suspicious of his loyalty. So his grandfather makes him publicly take an oath, and swear that he will not let his blood ties to the Turanian king Afrāsiyāb weaken his resolve or prevent him from exacting full vengeance. He does so, and even writes out a contract in his own hand, swearing to take revenge upon his maternal grandfather and all others who were responsible for slaying his father in Turān. Therefore, Kaykhosrow's right to kingship is the overriding political issue at the beginning of his reign, dividing the nobility into two camps. Following his success in conquering the fortress, those who opposed his rule reluctantly give in and the problem of his legitimacy is somewhat resolved. However, the question cannot be completely resolved while his elder brother Forud lives. Therefore, the episode of Forud's death in the hands of the Iranian forces of his brother has a double function in the general narrative. First, it resolves the question of royal legitimacy once and for all; furthermore, it reunites the ranks of the Iranian nobility that have split into two camps over Kaykhosrow's right to wear the Iranian crown. Let me briefly explain this further.

After Kaykhosrow wins the test and is appointed *de facto* leader of Iran, he decides to invade Turān and begin the bloody wars of vengeance for Siyāvosh's murder. In spite of the fact that many capable warlords are available to him, he puts his army under the command of Tus, the most dim-witted and arrogant Iranian warrior, who also happened to instigate and lead the faction that opposed his rule. Having put Tus in command, the king explicitly orders him *not* to cross Forud's territory on his way to Turān because he knows that Forud might feel threatened, and come out fighting. Predictably, however, Tus does exactly what he was told not to do, and in the ensuing fight, the Iranian nobles of both the pro-Kayk-





hosrow, and the anti-Kaykhosrow factions unite and kill Forud. Shortly thereafter, the army is recalled to Iran, and the king severely reprimands Tus and others for having slain his brother.

At first glance, the episode of Forud has no importance for the later wars of vengeance. The Iranians who fight him achieve no military objective, nor do they obtain any tactical or strategic goals that could be useful in their long-term project of punishing Turanians for Siyāvosh's murder. In fact, they add salt to the wound by killing the slain prince's son. But on deeper levels of signification the episode removes Kaykhosrow's sole legitimate rival for the crown, and also repairs the rift that had developed in the ranks of Persian nobility. Now the two factions have been brought together and molded into a single party who have killed Kaykhosrow's brother, and removed the king's only serious challenger. I have discussed the details of this episode, both in Persian and in English before, and will not labor the point further. Let me go on to consider the story of Rostam's fight with the demon, Akvān.

IV. Slaying Akvān, Ending Afrāsiyāb

The story of Rostam and the demon Akvān forms a logical dyad with the tale of the Iranian hero Bizhan's illicit love-affair with Afrāsiyāb's daughter, princess Manizheh. The two stories symbolically foretell the fall of the Turanian king, which follows these episodes. In other words, the order of the episodes in the *Shāhnāmeh* is as follows: Rostam and Akvān, followed by Bizhan and Manizheh, followed by the narrative of the wars that end in Afrāsiyāb's defeat and execution.

That the symbolic content of the episode of Rostam's fight with Akvān goes beyond the simple act of slaying the demon is also signaled by the quantitative distribution of the story's verses. Of the 186 couplets that are devoted to the telling of this tale, only about fifty concern the actual fight. The other 130 couples narrate Rostam's raiding of Afrāsiyāb's herds of horses and his capture of the king's four white elephants. Ferdowsi is aware of the narrative's symbolic significance; using the narrator's voice, he communicates it to his reader in the story's exordium (iii:288:17-18):

خردمندان داستان بشنود	به دانش گراید، بدین نگرود
ولیکن چو معنیش یادآوری	شوی رام و کوتاه شود داوری





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The wise who hears this tale told
Attracted [naturally] by wisdom, are repulsed by this
But when one reminds oneself of its [symbolic] sense
One is convinced by it and ceases to quarrel

Let me summarize the tale for those who don't know it before presenting my interpretation of it, and my reading of its relationship to the narratives that follow.

The Iranian king, Kaykhosrow, is told that an onager, a wild Asian ass, has appeared among the royal herds and injured many horses. The king suspects that a demon must have assumed an onager's form to inflict the damage. He sends Rostam to deal with it. Rostam rides to the pasture and spots the animal. He recognizes the demon Akvān disguised in onager form, and gives chase. But the onager disappears, and when the exhausted hero lies down to rest, it returns in its demonic form, lifts Rostam, and throws him into the sea. But Rostam manages to swim ashore, where to his surprise he finds his horse, Rakhsh, missing. He follows Rakhsh's tracks, and finds him among King Afrāsiyāb's herds, busily mounting the Turanian mares. The hero saddles his mount and seizing Afrāsiyāb's herd of horses, rides away. The king's herdsmen inform their master who happens by with a large contingent of warriors and four white elephants. Afrāsiyāb and his warriors attack Rostam to recapture their horses, but the hero single-handedly defeats them all. Then he takes possession of all their horses and the royal elephants and herds them back to Iran. On the way, he takes a quick time-out to fight and kill Akvān; then triumphantly returns home. Once in Iran, he divides the Turanian king's horses among the Persian warriors and makes a gift of the four royal elephants to Kaykhosrow.

V. From Unhorsing to Castration:

Given the fact that the narrative of Rostam's fight with the demon Akvān forms less than a third of the tale, and the fact that most of it concerns Rostam's seizure of Afrāsiyāb's herd of horses and the capture of his royal elephants, I believe that the central message of the episode is the unhorsing of Afrasiyab. In other words, it symbolizes Afrāsiyāb's defeat as warrior-king and represents his loss of military control over the





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kingdom. The story of Bizhan and Manizha immediately follows this episode; here Afrāsiyāb's disaster is completed; he loses family honor, and the women of his *harem*, which represents his defeat as a man and tells of his symbolic castration. As I have pointed out in a previous chapter, the winners of ancient wars expropriated the possessions and women of their defeated foe. Therefore, because Afrāsiyāb loses his horses and royal elephants in the course of the Akvān story, and shortly thereafter, in the episode of Bizhan and Manizheh, his daughter and all the women in his retinue, these contiguous episodes defeat him, shame him and unman him. They portend his impending doom.

But what do the loss of horses and elephants have to do with loss of dominion? Because Afrāsiyāb is a warrior-king, his most important possessions are those that have either martial significance or royal implications. The significance of the horse as the warrior's mount hardly needs proof. *Shāhnāme* warriors are mounted warriors who loath to fight on foot, and depriving them of their mounts by force of arms really amounts to unhorsing and defeating them as fighters. So Rostam's raiding of Afrāsiyāb's herds amounts to the warrior king's symbolic defeat. At the same time, because white elephants symbolize royal dominion and authority in the Persian epic tradition, Rostam's taking of Afrāsiyāb's royal elephants is equal to dragging him off his throne and depriving him of his crown. That's why the central message of the Akvān story is not the fight between Rostam and the demon; but rather the Turanian king's defeat and loss of power.

Afrāsiyāb's utter defeat is carried to its logical conclusion during the story of Bizhan and Manizhe that follows Akvān's tale. The warrior-king, defeated by Rostam in the battle-field, is shown to be incapable of defending even the women of his inner court against assault. Through Bizhan's illicit affair with his daughter, Afrāsiyāb's loses what little is left of his honor and the last vestiges of control over all that belongs to him. When a small band of Persian warriors under Rostam's command raids the royal harem and carries away his wives and concubines, he is subjugated both in military and in sexual terms. The sexual triumph of his Iranian enemies is signaled relatively early in the story of Akvān when Rostam's horse Rakhsh is described as mounting the mares of Afrāsiyāb's herd (iii:294:90):





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دمان رخس بامادیانان چو دیو میان گله برکشیده غریو

Rakhsh was cavorting among the mares
Neighing madly in the herd like a demon

Turanian warriors know that Rostam's successful raid on their king's palace, and his capture of Afrāsiyāb's women, means that they are effeminized in defeat. Outraged by their humiliating loss, they express their agony at the end of the story. I present the Persian text and the Warners' beautiful if slightly inaccurate English translation here (iii:387:1131-1134):

بزرگان توران گشاده کمر	به پیش سپهدار بر خاک سر
کز اندازه بگذشت ما را سخن	چه افگند باید بدین کار بئن؟
کزین ننگ بر شاه تا جاودان	بماند ز کردار بیژن نشان
به ایران به مردان ندانندمان	زنان کمر بسته خوانندمان

The troops formed rank, the great men loosed their loins,
And bowed their heads in dust before the king,
Exclaiming, "Things with us have passed all bounds!"
What must be done? This business of Bizhan
Will be a lasting stigma, *The Iranians*
Will call us men no more, but women armed.

I used the stories of Forud and Akvān and the conclusion of Bizhan and Manizheh's episode—all of which have been pronounced "external" to the main narrative of the *Shāhnāme*—in order to make the following point. As carefully constructed works of art, both the prose *Shāhnāme* that served as Ferdowsi's archetype, and our national poet's rendition of it into verse, are artistically unified. Nothing in the poem's narrative is grafted on as an afterthought or as an unconnected addition. Every tale is logically connected to the tales that precede and follow it by means of an intricate series of signs and symbols. All insinuations of incongruity or disjointedness in the poem's narrative are borne of either under-analysis or sloppy scholarship. The poem is relentlessly logical in terms of its narrative progression and internal logic.





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Having told you something about the poem's literary features, my next chapter examines its political and cultural significance. We will consider what it means for our culture to have a poem like the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. But remember, in that assessment I'm not concerned with such puerile, self-absorbed, and generally moronic questions as "what does the *Shāhnāmeḥ* mean to *me*," or "how does it relate to *my* life and circumstance." These, and many other similarly irrelevant and foolish questions will best be left to what little is left of the American educational system. My concern is a more general one. I want to reflect on what having the *Shāhnāmeḥ* as our national epic reveals about us, our country, our culture, and our collective soul—for lack of a better expression. I want to explore these questions with you young people, who have lived your entire lives far from your forefathers' land. I want to ask questions: for instance, can a people whose culture has produced a poem such as this ever be truly subjugated or broken? I want to look at our nation's place in a world dominated by a callous, brutal and declining empire that makes a stark distinction between "American life" and other kinds of human life, which it treats little better than insect life. I will contrast America's Manichaean view of the world and her dehumanization of us with what the *Shāhnāmeḥ* says about us and compare the truth of our cultural heritage with the lies western mass media spread around. What I propose to do in the next chapter is give an unapologetically nationalist reading of Iran's place in the world, as reflected by our national poem.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Kipling, Rudyard. *The Writings in Prose and Verse of Rudyard Kipling* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), vol.11, p.136.
- 2 A Persian translation of this passage is available in:
محمد امین ریاحی. سرچشمه های فردوسی شناسی: مجموعه نوشته های کهن در باره فردوسی و شاهنامه و نقد آنها (تهران: مؤسسه مطالعات و تحقیقات فرهنگی [پژوهشگاه]، ۱۳۷۰)، صص ۲۹۱–۲۹۰.
- 3 For a detailed discussion of the structure of Ferdowsi's prose archetype see:
محمود امیدسالار، "تصحیح و توضیح عبارتی از مقدمه شاهنامه ابومنصوری،" ایران شناسی، سال ۱۶ شماره ۳، ۲۰۰۴/۱۳۸۳، صص ۴۸۷–۴۹۳.
- 4 I will not discuss the idea of *mouvance* here because it is too technical. Those of you who are interested may want to look at my discussion of it—in English and Persian—in a long essay





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that was published as a supplemental volume by the Center for the Written Heritage in Iran. M. Omidasalar, *Eastern Texts, Western Techniques: European Editorial Theory and the Editing of Classical Persian* (Tehran: Miras-e Maktoob, 2009), pp.31-54 of the Persian text and 5-24 of the English section. The center has placed a link to the downloadable text of the short volume on their website. See: <http://www.mirasmaktoob.ir/files/admin/zamimeh-17.pdf>.

- 5 In the pre-Islamic religious traditions of Iran, Zakhāk is a three-headed dragon, created by the Evil Spirit in order to depopulate the earth.
- 6 In this part of the argument, I am building upon an idea that was first suggested by Amin Banani and his student, Fatemeh Izadpanah. See Banani, A. "Ferdowsi and the Art of Tragic Epic," in *Persian Literature*, ed. E. Yarshater (New York: Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988), p.111; and Izadpanah, F. *An Analytic Study of the Structure, Form, and Meaning of the Shahnameh* (University of California, Los Angeles Dissertation, 1980), p.14.
- 7 For references to this pre-Islamic story see:
مزدایور، کتایون. (بررسی دستنویس م. او. ۲۹): داستان گرشاسب، تهمورس و جمشید، گلشاه و متن های دیگر (تهران: آگاه ۱۳۷۸)، صص ۲۵۵-۲۵۳.
- 8 See Omidasalar, M. "The Dragon Fight in the National Persian Epic," *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 14(1987) 1-14.
- 9 See SMG Herbert A. Friedman (Ret.), "British Black Postcards of World War II," where you can also find the images of other posters and more information: <http://www.psywar.org/postcards.php>. See also Holman, Valerie. "Kem's Cartoons in the Second World War," *History Today*, March 2002, vol.52, no.3, pp.21-27. See also:
چلکوفسکی، پیتر. "شاهنامه فردوسی و تبلیغات انگلیسی"، ایرانشناسی، جلد ۲، ۱۳۶۹، شماره ۲، صص ۳۱۰-۳۲۰.



Chapter 8



A People of the Book

By the beginning of the fifth century, inhabitants of the Roman world, whether Christian, Jewish, or pagan, knew two models of peoplehood—one that we shall call *ethnic*, based on descent, custom, and territory; one *constitutional*, based on law and adhesion. ... At best, Rome, the Greek cities of the Classical Age, and perhaps the great Empires of Persia and Egypt could be seen as constitutional bodies based on law and common purpose. But the other [i.e., the *ethnic*] model ... prevailed, particularly when looking outside of *Romanitas* at the barbarian *gentes* that surrounded and increasingly threatened it.

Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, p.55

It was a hot day in late Spring, 2009. I was standing in the shade of a tree on Vali-ye Asr (former Pahlavi) Avenue, trying to hail a cab home. Two well-dressed, middle-aged men were doing the same thing nearby, while talking and joking with one another. I could hear snippets of their conversation over the incessant din of Tehran's traffic. From what little I could make out, neither was terribly fond of the government, but one was more vehement in his opposition. The one most critical of the government said something—all I could make out were the words, "America" and "rescue" (*nejāt*). The other one laughed uproariously and said quite loudly, "Eat shit and die! Let them





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rescue themselves from Iraq and Afghanistan. They don't have to save us," (*goh khordi! Beran khodeshuno az Arāq o Afghānestān nejāt bedan, nemikhād mā ro nejāt bedan*).

I had a difficult time keeping myself from busting out laughing; thankfully a sedan slowed down, and the driver asked if I needed a ride. He was one of the myriad Iranians who supplement their income by working as illegal taxi-drivers. I got in the backseat and began to laugh. The driver looked at me in the rear-view mirror and with a wicked smile on his lips, asked if I've been waiting long in the hot sun. Laughing even harder at the implications of his statement, I said, "Not long enough to lose my mind," and told him about the conversation that I had overheard in bits and pieces. The driver, a handsome man in his forties with a full head of black hair that was graying at the temples, and a thick black moustache, laughed, and said, "He shut him up good," (*khub javābesho dād*). He added, "I volunteered to go to the front twice (during the Iran-Iraq War), and have a twenty-percent disability because of chemical weapons [injuries] (*jānbāz-e shimiā'i-ye bist darsadiyam*). There's a lot more that I think the government should be doing for people like me, and I'm not happy with the services that I receive. But still, if America—I mean any country—tries to do something, I will volunteer again." He then shook his head, and recited under his breath a verse from the *Shāhnāmeḥ*:

بدین بوم و برزنده یک تن مباد چو ایران نباشد تن من مباد

If Iran is not to be, then may I not live,
May not a soul survive in this land

I stared out the car window at the torrential traffic of mid-day Tehran and tried to fight back the tears that filled my eyes. I was no longer hot and tired, nor in a hurry to get home. I reached out with my fingertips, and touched the back of the driver's seat in homage as a pilgrim would caress the blue tiles of a saint's tomb in some desert sanctuary.

I. Shāhnāmeḥ and Iranian Nationalism:

The verse that the driver recited is actually spurious. But that's not important. What matters is that Persians believe it is from the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. Moreover, other verses that convey a similar message abound in the





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poem. This brings me to the way in which the *Shāhnāmeḥ* mirrors and amplifies the idea of Iranian Nationalism: it's time we looked into the deep emotional bedrock that Persian culture—and especially our great epic—forms in our hearts.

Before discussing Persian nationalism's expression in the poem, I would like to make something clear: I do not believe that the standard definition of “nationalism” as an 18th century European phenomenon is applicable to Iran, or for that matter, universally valid. That “Western” definition grew out of Europe's special historical circumstances—drastically different from Iran's experience. For one thing, European nations evolved into their present forms quite gradually. Prior to the so-called “barbarian invasions,” most European states were provinces of the Roman Empire. Following the disintegration of the Empire, Western Europe broke into many small duchies and principalities with little or no central authority.

By contrast, the idea of Iran as a nation-state never died even after the Muslim conquest of the Middle East. The Samanids, Ghaznavids, Seljuqs, and even rulers of Arrān and Shirvān in the Caucasus, were eulogized by their court poets as kings of Iran. All of these monarchs tried to connect themselves to Iran's pre-Islamic rulers by constructing specious genealogies that legitimized their rule, and even when they did not rule over Iran *per se*, they aspired to Iranian kingship. Even a glance at verses composed by the court poets of these kings establishes this beyond all reasonable doubt. For instance, ‘Onsori, the chief-poet of Mahmud's court, repeatedly refers to his patron as “King of Iran,”¹ and expresses his concern about the nation: “*irān-zamin, irān-shahr*.”² The other two major Ghaznavid poets, Farrokhi and Manuchehri do the same.³ Beyond the borders of Iran proper, poets who resided in the courts of Persian and half-Persian provincial princes employ virtually identical expressions.⁴ We'll leave it at that because detailed examination of these poets would take us far afield, so let's stick to the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. I want to say a few words about the implications of an important topic in the poem, namely Iran's national flag or the *Derafsh-e Kāvīyān*, “The Kavian Banner.”

It is important to keep in mind that this flag was not a mythical banner. Early Arab accounts of Iran's conquest leave no doubt that it actually existed. We know that an Arab warrior by the name of Zerār ibn Khattāb





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captured it in the battle of Qādesiyya (637 A.D.) and sold it for 30,000 gold coins because of its decorative jewels. Zerār was a lot better at soldiering than business: the flag was later valued at 1.2 to 2 million gold coins. We are also told that the Caliph Omar had it burned after it was stripped of its valuable decorations. This, in turn, implies that Omar was aware of the banner's symbolic significance for Iranians. Therefore, our discussion of Iran's national flag in the *Shāhnāme* is not about dealing with mythology; we are examining mythologized history.

II. What's in a Flag?

It's not controversial to say that a national flag presupposes the existence of a nation, because it symbolizes that nation. But not every flag is a national symbol. For instance, legions of the Roman Empire carried their own standards, which functioned as the regimental colors of later armies, and did not symbolize the Roman Empire *per se*. In the Middle Ages, flags were used for the purposes of identification. Thus, flags of individual medieval aristocrats served as rallying points for their men-at-arms and also as a means of identifying them under all that armor. Flags could identify members of the nobility, as well as townships, guilds, or even religious orders. They were not national symbols.

In Western Europe, national flags appeared at the end of a long process that eventually created the region's nation-states. As aristocrats' fighting bands gradually evolved into national armies, their diverse banners and insignia were replaced by a single standard that represented the nation. Prior to this, national flags that were specific to European nations did not exist—for the simple reason that European nations had not been “imagined” yet.⁵ The oldest European flag, Denmark's *Dannebrog*, is said to date from the 13th century A.D. According to legend, this banner was given to a Danish king by God. But the textual reports of this event were all written at least 300 years later. In other words, according to some 16th century texts the Danish flag originated in the early half of the 13th century. No actual 13th century narrative of this flag's origin exists. We are told that the flag was literally dropped down to a Danish monarch during his campaigns in Russia, or alternatively in Estonia, and that he picked it up and rallied his troops to victory. That means the oldest European national





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flag has a divine, rather than secular origin, and the person who first used it in a “nationalist” project was emphatically royal—not a member of the general public. Let’s compare this to the story of Iran’s national standard, as it is related in the *Shāhnāme*.

In our epic, Iran’s national flag is called the Kavian Banner (*derafsh-e kāviyān*), and it is named after Kāveh, the man who invented it. But Kāveh was a simple blacksmith, and although his descendents rose in the ranks of Iranian epic warriors after his death, he was no aristocrat. Thus, Iran’s national standard does not owe its use as a national symbol to some aristocratic hero—as does the Danish banner—nor does it have a heavenly origin. That is, it did not drop from the sky into some king’s hands. It was, rather, invented by a humble blacksmith, who as a sign of his rebellion against the foreign dragon-king Zakhāk, fixed his leather apron upon a spear and rallied the general public around it. Remember that Zakhāk was invited into Iran by the Persian nobility who generally supported him (i:15:172-76). Therefore, Kāveh’s rebellion also symbolized the rebellion of the oppressed against their oppressors. The popular character of Kāveh’s rebellion is quite clear in the *Shāhnāme*. As soon as the blacksmith raises his makeshift banner the general public gathers around him, and they all go to join Zakhāk’s rival, a young man by the name of Fereydun (i:69:225-34). In contrast to the general public, Iranian nobles greatly fear Zakhāk, and remain faithful to him. Perhaps frightened by the demotic character of the uprising, and perhaps upset by the impertinence of the commoner who defies the king, they encourage Zakhāk to punish him (i:67:196-98 and 68:217-20). The point is that, unlike European flags, Iran’s national standard is of a demotic rather than divine or aristocratic origin. It belongs to the nation as a whole, rather than to a single noble house, or even to a specific religious sect or social class.

It is important to understand from the outset that our Kavian Banner was never adopted by a royal house as its own standard. It exclusively remained Iran’s *national flag*. This characteristic of the banner comes through quite clearly in the *Shāhnāme*, as well as in the earlier written sources which the poem is based on. Post conquest Persian and Arabic texts consistently depict the banner as a national symbol rather than the emblem of a royal or aristocratic family. Consider the features of this flag.





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First, the Kavian Banner's invention by the blacksmith Kāveh predates the ascension of the king who adopted it as the national standard. Second, that king, Fereydun, does not have an unambiguously royal bloodline. He is a boy who rebels against Zakhāk because the tyrant murdered both his father and his animal nursemaid, the magical cow, *Barmāya*. Third, throughout the poem, whenever the Kavian Banner is sent out with an army, it is depicted as an independent standard, quite different from the royal and aristocratic banners that fly alongside it in many military expeditions. Let me give you a few examples.

In the war between prince Manuchehr and his grand uncles, Tur and Salm, the prince's army carries the Kavian Banner as the official standard of the imperial forces (i:138:789 and 139:810). However, Manuchehr's own flag is a different object altogether. We know this because the warlord Qāran borrows it in order to signal his forces during a raid, when he leaves the Iranian army's main body with a detachment of warriors (i:146:914). Throughout this episode, Manuchehr's standard is specifically referred to as "King Manuchehr's banner, *derafsh-e manuchehr shāh*" (i:146:927 and 147:936-39) while the Kavian Banner is called by its own name. Even in his ascension speech, Manuchehr describes himself *not* as the possessor, but merely as "the brandisher of the Kavian Banner" *farāzanda-ye kāviyāni derafsh* (i:162:11).

In the story of Siyāvosh, a disagreement with his father forces the prince into Turanian exile. Before he leaves the forces under his command, he gives the Kavian Banner to a warrior, who must return it to the court (ii:281:1203). Later in the story, when King Kāvus sends an army to Turān in retaliation for Siyāvosh's murder, the Kavian Banner goes with the army, although the King himself stays behind. Naturally, if the Kavian Banner was the same thing as the King's personal standard, it would have stayed in the capital with him (ii:393:213 and 402:301). Following the return of Siyāvosh's son, Kaykhosrow, to Iran, during the political unrest over succession, Kaykhosrow's uncle, prince Fariborz, marches against the Bahman Fortress, which he aims to conquer as a test of his legitimacy. The Kavian Banner is sent along with him as the standard of Iran's forces, *not* as his flag (ii:462:587-91). We know this because, according to





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an earlier episode, the prince's personal standard is a different flag of distinct shape and characteristics (ii:162:548). Finally, after Kayk-hosrow is recognized as the legitimate ruler of Iran, Tus, the commander-in-chief of the Iranian forces and a man who had opposed Kaykhusrow's appointment, brings the Kavian Banner to the new king and asks him to give it to whomever he chooses as commander of his forces. But the new king reappoints the warrior, and says that none is more deserving of the office than Tus (ii:468:670-78):

همان طوس با کاویانی درفش	همی رفت با کوس و زرینه کفش
بیاورد و پیش جهاندار برد	زمین را ببوسید و او را سپرد
بدو گفت کین کوس و زرینه کفش	به نیک اختر این کاویانی درفش
ز لشکر بین تا سزاوار کیست	یکی پهلوان از در کار کیست
ز گفتارها پوزش آورد پیش	بیچید از آن بیهده رای خویش
جهاندار پیروز بنواختش	بخندید و بر تخت بنشاختش
بدو گفت کین کاویانی درفش	همین پهلوانی و زرینه کفش
نبینم سزای کسی از سپاه	ترا زبید این نام و این دستگاه
ترا پوزش اکنون نباید به کار	نه بیگانه را خواستی شهریار

Then Tus approached him, bringing the Kavian Banner,
The drums, and the golden boots
He kissed the ground and surrendered them to the king.
And said: "Here are the war drum and the golden boots
And also this glorious Kavian Banner.
See who in the host deserves to have them
What warrior is fit for the task.
He apologized for all of his indiscretions
And renounced his foolish opposition
But the victorious prince was kind to him,
Smiled and seated him by the throne,
And said: "This Kavian Banner,
Command of the army, and these golden boots,
I see fitting for none in the host
The honor and office suit you alone.
No need to apologize now.
[After all], you supported another prince of the royal house.





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Again, as the commander of the Iranian forces, Tus merely carries the Kavian Banner. His personal standard, his code of arms if you will, has a different form. It bears the likeness of the elephant, and is a distinct object (ii:159:514-18).

During all wars of vengeance between Iran and Turān, the king's standard and the Kavian Banner, as distinct standards, are present at the same battles. Therefore, they cannot be the same thing (for instance iv:135:2091-92; cf. iv:211:623).

I can present evidence like this until we all start to nod, but my point is not to overwhelm you with evidence. I want to show that people who have no sense of themselves as a distinct nation need no national flag. Of course many ancient peoples had a sense of their distinct ethnicity, without necessarily also constituting a "nation." But the Iranian "nation," at least in its epic manifestation, was a multi-ethnic, a cosmopolitan entity. It was not racially defined. Neither a common language nor a common religion encompassed it. Iran was, and has always been, to borrow Patrick J. Geary's description, a *constitutional* rather than an *ethnic* nation. The armies of the *Shāhnāme* are multi-ethnic armies that identify with one land, and have a national sense that goes beyond their regional and local identities. For instance, although the hero Rostam is recognized as a native of his hometown Zābol, his nationality is described as Iranian (iii:394:135-36):

خجسته بروم زاول که شیر	همی پروراند کیان دلیر
فری شهر ایران و فرخ گوان	که دارند چون تو یکی پهلوان

Happy is the land of Zāvol where lions
And brave nobles are raised
Fortunate is the land of Iran and its fine warriors
Who have a hero such as you.

Anushirvān does the same, when informed, while winning a campaign in the Caucasus, that the people in the provinces of Gilan and Baluchistan have rebelled (vii:116-17:386-87):

به ایرانیان گفت: الانان و هند	شد از بیم شمشیر ما چون پرند
بسند نهاشیم با شهر خویش	همی شیر جوییم و پیچان ز میش





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He said to the Iranians: Caucuses and India
Surrendered to our blade.
Are we not able to keep our own country calm?
Are we to withdraw in the face of sheep, when we seek lions to fight?

Throughout the *Shāhnāmah*, Iranians fight under a national flag, which has no equal in Europe's pre-modern history.

The Iranian nation is politically personified by the Kavian Banner in our national epic. Such a nation is not a concoction brewed in the 18th or 19th centuries in the same sense that European nations are understood to be. This is why wayward Iranian intellectuals, who mindlessly parrot the accepted truism that "nationalism is an 18th century European phenomenon," are wrong. They start with a theoretical assumption, then try to impose that assumption on Iran's history and literature. They never begin with the historical or the literary record. They do not work their way out from within Iranian evidence. These expatriates have mutated into transplants, who in their hearts of hearts no longer consider themselves Iranian. The talking-head variety of these mutations give themselves away when they appear in the U.S. media, referring to American forces and policies as "our," while referring to the Iranian nation or its actions as "they" or "their." Neither western nor eastern, they project their own lack of ethnic identity back unto Persian history and culture, which they disassemble into conflicting ethnicities, languages, and groups. But Iranians have always had multiple identities *alongside* a firm national identity that grew from the deep roots of their ancient historical experience.

No insight into Iranian nationalism can be achieved by mindlessly repeating Western formulas. What such statements do achieve is the implicit renunciation of Iran's uniqueness as an ancient "nation" in the Middle East. This renunciation serves an agenda that fantasizes about Iran's disintegration into smaller, more manageable satellites that are divided along ethnic, regional and linguistic lines.

The Iranian left could never be accused of thoughtful analysis. It has always landed on the wrong side of common sense and history. Iranian "Communism" is not an ideology, but a wish fulfillment factory, which produces simple-minded sloganeers. Latching onto some Western ideology *de jour* like the proverbial hope to an anchor, they "beat on, boats





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against the current, born back ceaselessly into” their own fatuous notion of history. The Iranian left has never “theorized” about the *Shāhnāme* from inside out. It has always found it easier to adopt some Western model, then desperately tried to apply the inapplicable.

To return to my original point, there may be little doubt that European nationalism was called into being in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by intellectuals and politicians who “transformed earlier, romantic, nationalist traditions into political programs.”⁶ But the truth of this statement when applied to European nationalism is no guarantee of its *universal* validity. There were no European states after the fall of Rome in 5th century AD. Let’s consider the case of the English and the French as examples.

The *Handbook of British Chronology*, published by the Royal Historical Society in 1986, dates “the effective creation of the Kingdom of England from A. D. 927,” when Athelstan, king of Wessex and Mercia, conquered the parts of Northumbria that were under Danish and English control and, “in effect accepted the existence of a separate kingdom of Scotland.”⁷ This was two years before Ferdowsi’s birth, when Iran as a nation was already quite old.

The French case is even more striking. In 476 A.D., the Franks, one of the numerous Germanic tribes that were pushing against the borders of the Roman Empire, crossed into Roman territory under their chief, Clovis I, and took over northern Gaul. In time, they adopted Christianity and extended their control into the area that is now known as Upper Normandy and the Paris Basin. Gradually, the Frankish invaders intermarried with the Gallo-Roman inhabitants of their newly acquired lands, and achieved a greater degree of cultural assimilation with the local population. Clovis went on to subdue the Burgundians, and advanced as far south as the Pyrenees, which he seized from the Visigoths. All those successful military campaigns enabled him to control almost the entire territory that is called France today.

Clovis’ conquests served as the foundation of the powerful Frankish Empire that reached its zenith under Charlemagne in the 8th and 9th centuries. However, following Charlemagne’s death, the empire was fragmented, and effectively disappeared for nearly 1000 years. It was not put





back together again until the 18th and 19th centuries.⁸ There was no such thing as France, with Paris as its capital, in the eighth and early ninth centuries, or even under Charlemagne.

Following the gradual disintegration of the Carolingian Empire, several largely or wholly independent entities took over the area now known as modern France. There is little disagreement among medieval historians that, until the reign of Philip the Fair in the 14th century, French rulers were not given the title of *roi de France*, "king of France," but were instead referred to as *rex Francorum* "king of the Franks." That is, even the nominal authority assigned to them was not an authority over a state *per se*, but over a people or a tribe. What the title *rex Francorum* further implies is that the Frankish king exercised authority over the Frankish tribesmen of Europe, and by implication over whatever area these tribesmen controlled. He was not the ruler of a country called France, which existed outside or above tribal conquests.

Depending on the extent of an individual Frankish king's power over his nobles, the effective control that he exercised varied considerably. For instance, even after the founder of the French monarchy, Hugh Capet (939-996), was elected king by the Frankish nobility in 987, his military and political control was limited to a small area of about 400 square miles around Paris. And in fact, he risked being captured and held for ransom by the neighboring nobility, whenever he ventured beyond the borders of his small dominion. Generally, the same is true for most of what became modern European states.

III. Country as the National Home:

The idea of Iran as an Iranian's home is quite clearly expressed in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. The poem uses the word *khāneh* "house, home," as a synonym for "country." That means the poem recognized the existence of a *homeland*, a *home country*, distinct from an individual's home-town. For instance, during his voluntary exile in Turān, prince Siyāvosh says (ii:298:1453-56):

نخواهم همی روی کاوس دید	اگر من به ایران نخواهم رسید
تہمتن کہ روشن روان من است	چو دستان کہ پروردگار من است
بہ توران همی خانہ باید گزید	چن از روی ایشان بباید برید
مگوی این سخن پیش کس جز براز	پدر باش و این کدخدائی بساز





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If I am not to see Iran again
Nor the face of Kāvus
Or those of Dastān, who raised me
And Rostam, who is my very soul;
If I am cut off from them all
And must chose my home (*khāneh*) in Turān,
Then be a father to me and take care of this affair
But keep it all secret.

In the story of his wars in the Caucasus, King Anushirvān says to the Caucasians (vii:114:355):

همه جنگجویان بیگانه‌ایم سپاه و سپهبد نه زین خانه‌ایم

We are foreign warriors
The warlord and the host, we are not from your homeland (*khāneh*)

The picture of Iran depicted in the *Shāhnāmeḥ* is quite distinct from the European states presented in that region's literatures and history. The *Shāhnāmeḥ* treats the land of Iran as independent of the kings who ruled over it. And although Iranian kings are given dominion over the country by God, they do not own the country. They merely serve as its guardians. Using the metaphor of "the house" for "the country," the king is described as the head of a national household. It is explicitly stated that, even when the head is driven out of the house, others should strive to ensure its survival (vi:527:1473):

مگر بوم ایران بماند بجای چو از خانه آواره شد کدخدای

So that the land of Iran may survive
Even though the head of the household is driven out

The idea that the country is an enclosure, a home or an orchard which belongs to its inhabitants, and the ancillary notion that Iran's inhabitants must defend it against outside forces, are expressed quite eloquently (viii:345:275-82):

که ایران چو باغیست خرم بهار شگفته همیشه گل کامگار





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چو پالیز گردد ز مردم تهی	پراز نرگس و نار و سیب و بهی
همه شاخ نار و بهی بشکنند	سپرغم یکایک ز بن برکنند
به پرچینش بر، نیزه‌ها خار او	سپاه و سلیحست دیوار او
چه باغ و چه دشت و چه دریا، چه راغ	اگر بفگنی خیره دیوار باغ
دل و پشت ایرانیان نشکنی	نگر تا تو دیوار او نفگنی
خروش سواران و کین آختن	کزان پس بود غارت و تاختن
به اندیشه ^۶ بد منه درمیان	زن و کودک و بوم ایرانیان

Iran is like a lush garden in the Spring
Where roses bloom eternally
And narcissus, pomegranates, apples, and quinces thrive.
When the garden is abandoned by its guardians
Others will uproot its flower-patches
And break the branches of its fruit-trees
The army and tools of war are the garden's walls
And lances are like thorns affixed on top of its fence [to bar entry]
If the wall of the garden is carelessly torn down
Then there is no difference between it and the wilderness [beyond]
Take care not to destroy its walls
And not to break the hearts and backs of Iranians
If you do, then raids and combat will ensue
And also the battle-cries of horsemen and the din of war
Risk not the safety of the Iranians' wives, children, and land
Over bad policies and plans.

The primacy of the land over the king is unequivocal. In the story of Iran's war against the land of Hāmāvarān, the Persian king Kāvus is captured by the Hāmāvarānian ruler. When neighboring countries learn that Iran is without king, they begin to raid and pillage the country. The Iranians send an emissary to Rostam, and ask for his help, saying (ii:81:195-97):

کنام پلنگان و شیران شود	دریغ است ایران که ویران شود
نشستگاه شهریاران بدی	همه جای جنگی سواران بدی
نشستگاه تیز چنگ ازدهاست	کنون جای سختی ورنج و بلاست





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It is a pity for Iran to be ruined
And be turned into a wilderness
The land that was the home of warriors
And the seat of kings
Has now become a place of hardship, suffering, and misfortune
It has become the lair of fierce dragons.

Rostam launches a counterattack, drives the enemy out, and advances against Hāmāvarān. However, he is hesitant to unleash the full force of his fury on the enemy for fear that the Hāmāvarānians might harm the king whom they hold prisoner. Therefore, he sends a message to Kāvus and tells him why he hesitates to attack. The King's reply tells us all we need to know (ii:85-86:239-44 and 247-48):

چو رستم چنین دید نزدیک شاه	نهانی برفگند گردی —راه
که شاه سه کشور بیاراستند	به رزم من از جای برخاستند
اگر کینه را من بجنیم ز جای	ندانند سر را بدین کین ز پای
مباید کزین کین به تو بد رسد	که کار بد از مردم بد سزد
مرا تخت بربر نیاید به کار	اگر بد رسد بر تن شهریار
فرستاد پاسخ که مندیش ازین	نه گسترده از بهر من شد زمین ...
تو مرخش رخشنده را ده عنان	بیارای گوشش به نوک سنان
ازیشان یکی زنده اندر جهان	ممان آشکارا و اندر نهان

Seeing the state of affairs,
Rostam secretly sent an envoy to the king
Saying: the kings of the three countries
Have united against me in battle
If I move to fight them
They might respond irrationally
I fear that harm may come to you because of my actions
They are evil men and capable of evil deeds
The throne of Berber would be of no use to me
If [my lord] the king is harmed
The king responded: Have no fear of this
The vast earth was not created for my sake ...
Let your steed freely gallop
Lower your lance between his ears





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And leave not a single one of them
Alive anywhere in the world.

The point of this exchange is that the safety of the king, although important for the security and order of the country, is not the most important concern when the nation is endangered. The world, as King Kāvus says, was not created for his sake. What matters is Iran.

IV. Everything to Everyone:

As I pointed out in my preface to this volume, the *Shāhnāmeḥ* evokes strong feelings among all Iranians. These feelings feed into how we perceive the poem, and through it, ourselves. Members of the general public, nursed from childhood on oral versions of Iran's epic tales, adapt these tales into their personal psychology, and construct a reassuring narrative, which is rooted in their nation's folk tradition. They draw on the *Shāhnāmeḥ's* authority to confirm what they believe about themselves and their world. Thus, among the traditionally inclined, folk versions of *Shāhnāmeḥ* stories function as validations of ethnic and national identities, and also as explanatory legends that clarify the "whys" and "hows" of their cultural landscape. These legends define place names, describe why mountains and rivers have their forms, why certain festivals are celebrated, and many other aspects of our world and world-view. This traditional narrative has a confirmatory role in our folk culture. It changes only as Persian culture itself changes. It does not challenge *who* we are and *how* we are. It simply validates and affirms our image of ourselves, soothing and alleviating anxiety in times of cultural change.

The educated urban classes, especially the Westernized among them, react differently to our national poem. Those in the extreme right, who think of themselves as "Aryans" and have adopted the West's myth of "Aryan" racial superiority, draw on the *Shāhnāmeḥ* as support for their vulgar racist notions. Hopelessly brain-dead from their own toxins, they do not understand that the *Shāhnāmeḥ* celebrates *Iranianness*, not some mutant Nazi notion of *Iranian race*, and that it has nothing to say about "inferior" or "superior" races. The poem's primary purpose is to exalt Iran and Iranians—*not* to excoriate others. Although I will have more





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to say about this clique's racial delusions later, let me briefly point out the poem's attitude towards Turks and Arabs—the Persian racists' typical scapegoats—by a couple of examples from its text.

All lands to the north of Iran are considered “Turkish” in the geography of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. The poem employs the ethnonym “Turk” to refer to the Chinese, as well as to all the peoples who live beyond the Oxus river. The mythical king Fereydun divided the world into Turān, where the “Turkish” peoples reside, Rum (pronounced *room*), where the western peoples live, and Iran, because he divided these lands among his three sons. So the *Shāhnāmeḥ* considers the kings of these three realms to be related by virtue of being descendants of the same royal house. The text states this up front and is careful to attribute any hostilities between Iran and her neighbors to some harm done to the Iranians by others. Epic kings and heroes do not fight others just because they are different. Moreover, mindful of the family relationship between the kings of Turān and Iran, the Persians are always ready to cease hostilities when their honor is not compromised. Consider the following case.

Following the defeat of the Turanians during the reign of Kayqobād, the Turanian prince, Afrāsiyāb sues for peace, and Kayqobād agrees with his entreaty. But Rostam, at that time still a teenager, objects to the king's decision (i:354-355:137-41):

مجوی آشتی در گه کارزار	بدو گفت رستم که ای شهریار
بدین روز گرز من آوردشان	نبود آشتی هیچ در خوردشان
که چیزی ندیدم نکوتر ز داد	به رستم چنین گفت پس کیقباد
به سیری همی سر بیچد ز جنگ	نبیرهء فریدون و پور پشنگ
به کژی و ناراستی ننگرد	سزد گر هر آنکس که دارد خرد

Rostam said to the king
 Seek not peace when it's meet to war
 There was no [thought of] peace in their hearts
 It was the blows of my mace that forced them to this [meekness].
 Kayqobād, then responded to Rostam, saying:
 I see naught more fitly than fairness
 The grandson of Fereydun, the son of Pashang,
 Sated [with bloodshed], turns away from war.





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It is fitting that the wise
Also turn from contrariness and deceit

Kayqobād considers Afrāsiyāb, who is the “Turkish” prince par excellence, to be worthy of respect because he is also descended from Iran’s own royalty, Fereydun. So, unlike modern Iranian racists, neither king Kayqobād nor the *Shāhnāme* are in the business of putting others down for their race and ethnicity, nor to destroy them because they can.

Many Iranian rulers were the children of foreign women. Aside from Fereydun’s three sons, Salm, Tur, and Iraj, who married Yemenite women, and Siyāvosh and Kaykhosrow, both of whom had Turanian mothers, several historical kings are said to have been of non-Iranian maternity. For instance, the 6th Century ruler Hormozd IV (r. 579-590) had a Chinese mother. For this reason, Hormozd is given the epithet, “Hormozd of Turkish blood,” *hormoz-e tork-zād*—China was considered part of the Turkish lands (vii:605:1676). When Hormozd’s son, Khosrow II sends an envoy to China’s Emperor and asks for his help, the Iranian ambassador alludes to the Chinese lineage of the Persian king, and reminds the Emperor that the two rulers share family ties (viii:192:2516-17):

کنون شاه ایران به تن خویش تست همه شاد و غمگین به کم بیش تست
به هنگام شاهان با آفرین پدر مادرش بود خاقان چین

Now, the king of Iran is your kin
He cares about your fortune—good or ill
In the days of the great kings of yore
The Chinese Emperor was his maternal grandfather

There are many examples of this in our poem (see for instance, vii:480:182-83; 483:221-22; 494-495:350-67, etc.).

As a national epic, the *Shāhnāme* does not have a racial agenda. It is focused on Iran, and sings the glory of our nation. Although the poem is understandably unkind to Iran’s enemies, its nationalist agenda is not driven by racial considerations, nor does it treat national enemies as racially inferior. Contrary to the belief that the poem is anti-Arab, except for its final chapters that give a matter-of-fact narrative of Iran’s takeover by the Muslims, it often portrays Arabs as Iran’s allies. Arabs





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served beside Iranians many times: they joined forces with Kaykhosrow during his wars of vengeance against Turān (iv:9:93-4), and served in the armies of Anushirvān and Khosrow-Parviz during their various expeditions (vii:252:1979; 614:1758). In fact, when Iranian nobles rebelled against Khosrow-Parviz, the king felt he should turn to his Arab allies : *nabāshand yāvar magar tāziyān* “only the Arabs can aid us now” (viii:48:606). Later, when he was escaping to Byzantium from his rebellious nobles, an Arab merchant helped him, and fed the king and his starving entourage (viii:76:977-88).

Earlier in the saga of Sassanid Emperor Bahrām-e Gur, we learn that during his childhood, the king was put into the care of the Arab king Monzer. Monzer not only served as Bahrām’s guardian and educated him in his Yemeni kingdom; he also served as the young prince’s chief ally against the Iranian nobility, who refused to recognize Bahrām’s right to the Iranian throne. Monzer and his Arab warriors made the Persian nobility relent and accept Bahrām as ruler by force of arms (vi:366-385 and 389-409).

The racial nonsense that is projected unto the *Shāhnāmeḥ* is of very recent vintage. It is rooted in the bizarre racial propaganda that the Shah’s government consciously promoted for its own political purposes. The coterie of Iranians who continue to believe these absurdities have not actually read the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. But because it is such a potent cultural icon, they project their hopes, fears, dreams, and, most certainly, prejudices onto it. They turn the great epic into a racial weapon, a justification for prejudice; and *that* is something that the poem is not designed to be. The *Shāhnāmeḥ* is a subtle and profound work of art, exactly the opposite of this cadre.

The Iranian Left has its own interpretation. Aside from projecting materialist sentiments onto Ferdowsi, the leftists tumble into their usual acrobatics, trying to transform black into white, right into wrong, and sense into nonsense. A good example of their attempts to Stalinize the poem is their strange reinterpretation of Fereydun and Zakhāk’s episode. This incomparably simple-minded interpretation was originally proposed by Ali Hosuri, and made famous by the contemporary Persian poet, Ahmad Shamlu (1925-2000).

Shamlu, who never graduated from high school, read the story of Fereydun’s victory over king Zakhāk to mean something completely at





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odds with the mythology, literary sensibility, and world-view of Iranian culture. He subverted the original story by arguing that, far from being the embodiment of evil, Zahhāk represents the working classes who rose against their aristocratic oppressors, whom he saw personified as Ferey-dun. Although a small number on the Left's lunatic fringe pushed hard to promote Shamlu's topsy-turvy view of the story as avant-garde, the interpretation was so far gone that even a majority of Iranian Leftists found themselves unable to stomach it. Mercifully, it has now been consigned to the dustbin of history.

Repulsive as interpretations of the *Shāhnāme* by radicals on both ends of the ideological spectrum might be to most Iranians, they are not unexpected from those who aim to use the poem for their ideological and racial ends. However, while Iranian Rightists' racial notions are simply stupid and may be dismissed as such, the Leftists present their lunacy as innovation, as "thinking outside the box." But nothing in the history of the Iranian Left implies that it has ever been able to think outside the box. Sheepishly marching behind its ideological masters, it has only managed to paint the proverbial box red. It has traded the racist right-wing doctrine of "Aryan" superiority for another oxymoronic vulgarity: A Stalinist version of "Human Rights." The Leftists place their country behind a long list of dogmas from a failed 19th century European philosophy, and being for *everything*, they end up being for nothing. Like their brethren on the Right, Persian Marxists either end up in the pockets of their nation's enemies, or as pawns in the relentless propaganda war against Iran.

The point here is that the *Shāhnāme*—and for that matter the whole history of Persian literature—become mere springboards from which anti-Iranian groups of every shade launch their ideological projects. The most extreme of these groups actively advocate the invasion of their homeland by the United States. Let's look more deeply into the darkness of this treasonous inanity, and see what the *Shāhnāme* has to say about it.

V. Courting the Dragon:

As we saw earlier, the miserable millennium that followed the dragon-





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king, Zāhhāk's takeover of Iran was a self-induced misery. It happened when a coterie of the Iranian elite travelled to Arabia, and asked Zāhhāk to take over Iran's throne. The text is quite clear (i:51:177-76):

یکایک بیامد از ایران سپاه	سوی تازیان برگرفتند راه
شنیدند کانجایی مهترست	پراز هول شاه اژدها پیکرست
سواران ایران همه شاه جوی	نهادند یکسر به ضحاک روی
به شاهی برو آفرین خواندند	ورا شاه ایران زمین خواندند
مرآن اژدها فش بیامد چو باد	به ایران زمین تاج بر سر نهاد

The warriors of Iran
Set out for the land of the Arabs
They heard that there is a lord there,
A fearsome dragon-king.
The nobles of Iran, all seeking a king,
Turned to Zāhhāk's court.
They saluted him as king,
And addressed him as the king of Iran.
The dragon-king then quickly moved
To Iran, and placed the crown on his head.

In the historical chapters of this volume, we have already seen the lamentable and recurring tendency of the Iranian elite to sell-out their country at the first sign of trouble. The *Shāhnāme* makes ample literary use of this behavior throughout its narrative. We have already seen how the last Achaemenid Emperor, Darius III, was betrayed and killed by his own nobles. In the *Shāhnāme*, the king pleads with his aristocracy to stand and fight (v:544:197-202):

چو دارا بران کرسی زر نشست	برفتند گردان خسرو پرست
به ایرانیان گفت کای مهتران	خردمند و شیران و جنگاوران
ببینید تا رای این کار چیست	همی گفت بادر دو چندی گریست
چنین گفت کامروز مردن بنام	به از زنده دشمن بدو شادکام
نیاگان و شاهان ما تا بُدند	به هر سال باژی همی بستدند
به هر کار ما را زبون بود روم	کنون بخت آزادگان گشت شوم





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When Dārā sat upon his golden throne
 [And] his nobles gathered
 He said to the Iranians: My lords
 [O'] wise, valiant, [and] warlike!
 See what is the way to deal with this affair
 He consulted them distraught, and tearful.
 He said: This day, it is better to die in honor
 Than to live, subject to the enemy's will
 Our kings and forefathers, as far back as memory reaches
 Exacted yearly tribute from Rum.
 Rum was subject to our will in every respect
 But now, the luck of [Iran's] noble [people] has turned.

But the Iranian aristocracy, wishing to preserve their privileges and lands, think nothing of the king's pleas, and even less of their country's independence. When it is time to face Alexander's armies, they go along grudgingly, and without courage or commitment (v:553:309-12):

سپاهی نه برآرزو رزمخواه	چو دارا بیاورد لشکر براه
سربخت ایرانیان گشته زیر	شکسته دل و گشته از رزم سیر
چو روبه شد آن دشت شیر زیان	نیاویختند ایچ بارومیان
از ارج بزرگی به خواری شدند	گرانمایگان زینهار ی شدند

When Dārā led his army forth
 —An army unwilling to fight—
 Disheartened, and loath to war
 The Iranian fortune upon the wane,
 They did not fight the Greeks
 That host of lions turned into [timid] foxes
 The nobles asked Greeks for respite
 And to save their own stations, they disgraced themselves

Later, during the reign of Bahrām-e Gur, China and Rum attack Iran, when the king is absent. Once again, the nobility follows its customary pattern, submitting to the enemy in the hope of preserving its wealth and position (vi:526-527:1463-82). Although Bahrām's brother and viceroy, Nersi, tries to persuade them to stand and fight,





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they refuse, with explicitly selfish reasoning (vi:527:1480-82):

نماند برین بوم و بر بوی و رنگ	چو خاقان به ایران شتابد به جنگ
بکوبند برخیره ما را به پای	سپاهی و نرسی نماند به جای
بماند، ز بن نگسلد پای ما	همی چاره سازیم تا جای ما

When the Chinese Emperor attacks us
He will destroy all that is of worth in this land
Neither warriors nor Nersi will survive his onslaught
They will crush us under foot
We [must] find a recourse so that our station
Is not destroyed, and we can maintain a foothold [here].

Toward the end of the Sassanids' rule, the rebellious general Bahrām-e Chubineh, who was defeated and driven to China, completely sells out when he asks the Chinese Emperor to put an army under his command, so that he can conquer Iran and Rum for China (viii:188:2459-64):

بیامد دمان پیش خاقان چین	بدو گفت کای مهتر بآفرین
شنیدم که آن ریمـن بدهنر	همی نامه سازد یک اندر دگر
سپاهی دلاور ز چین برگزین	بدان تاترا گردد ایران زمین
بگیرم به شمشیر ایران و روم	ترا شاه خوانم بران مرز و بوم
به نام تو بر، پاسبانان به شب	به ایران و نیران گشایند لب

Bahrām rushed to the Emperor of China
And said to him, my lord!
I heard that worthless evil one
Is sending you letter after letter [requesting my arrest]
[Now,] select a valiant Chinese army [and give it to me]
So that the land of Iran may become yours
I will conquer Iran and Greece by force of arms
And will call you king over those realms
Afterwards, your name will [day and] night
Echo over Iranian and non-Iranian lands

It is as though Ferdowsi's narrative of the Iranian elite's behavior asserts a prophetic awareness of the modern expatriate members of this





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social class, who show the same treachery in betraying their homeland and personal honor yet again. Young readers should understand that, contrary to any romantic stories they may have heard about Pre-Islamic Iran's noble aristocracy, the fact is that most of these over-privileged wimps sold their homeland out, time and again. It's a long, ugly and continuing tradition.

The story of Zakhāk is of course, exactly that—a story. There never was a dragon-king by that—or any other—name, and he never ruled Iran for a thousand years. It's all fiction. But fiction has its own truth. The treachery of those Iranians who invited him into their country—that act of betrayal and compromise—is a timeless fact. Our elite's tendency to abnegate has cost the nation dearly again and again throughout our long history. Its latest manifestation is the Iranian talking-heads in the contemporary Zakhāk's media, who shill for the invasion, isolation, and blockading of their ancestral land. They forget that their forerunners' treachery cost the nation dearly for a thousand years—or maybe they know the pattern all too well, and want to cash in.

The Western dragon lurks beyond Iran's borders. America—with heavily armed, trigger-happy and culturally illiterate soldiery wielding unmanned drones, missiles, and warplanes—is poised on Iran's flanks. Neither moral considerations nor aversion to carnage keeps this contemporary Zakhāk away. Iranian life, like lives of non-Americans everywhere, means nothing to the U.S. government, its corporate sponsors, or for that matter, to the majority of American citizens. What keeps the dragon out of our land is the certain knowledge that Kāveh's descendants will exact a bloody and economically ruinous payback on the West. It is the fear of fighting Iran's battle-tested and ideologically potent nationalist forces and the knowledge that what the blacksmith's children might lack in hardware they more than make up for in heart, commitment, and love of country. That knowledge—to say nothing of simple economic expediency—keeps the dragon in its lair. Meanwhile, the West's expatriate Persian elite continues on the well-worn path of its predecessors: those who invited Zakhāk into Iran, those who assassinated Darius and joined Alexander, and those who cozied up to the Chinese Emperor during the reign of Bahrām-e Gur. The descendants of this desiccated elite





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have again sided with the dragon against their own country, under the pretexts of supporting human rights, women's rights, minority rights, and any other rights that don't include the Persian people's right to a politically and culturally independent, sovereign nation.

As I pointed out before, *Shāhnāmeḥ* accounts of the Iranian elite's treachery is, of course, poetry—*not* history. But often poets anticipate much that social scientists and psychologists only formulate after the fact. Freud recognized the poets' prescience when he wrote: "Everywhere I go I find that a poet has been there before me." It is with this in mind, that I argue that the *Shāhnāmeḥ's* depiction of ancient Iranian politics demonstrates a psychological depth so acute that Ferdowsi can predict the rationalizations and equivocations of the traitors' progeny: those who, in concert with their Western handlers, call for Iran's isolation, invasion and submission.

VI. Costs of Betrayal:

Chalmers Johnson, Professor emeritus of political science at the University of California, who also served as an advisor to the CIA between 1967 and 1973, opens his volume *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (New York, 2006), with a quotation from Susanna Arundhati Roy. The quote is from her essay, "The Algebra of Infinite Justice," which was published in *The Guardian*, September 29, 2001:

Who is Osama bin Laden really? Let me rephrase that. What is Osama bin Laden? He's America's family secret. He is the American president's dark Doppelgänger. The savage twin of all that purports to be beautiful and civilized. He has been sculpted from the spare rib of a world laid to waste by America's foreign policy: its gunboat diplomacy, its nuclear arsenal, its vulgarly stated policy of "full-spectrum dominance," its chilling disregard for non-American lives, its barbarous military interventions, its support for despotic and dictatorial regimes, its merciless economic agenda that has munched through the economies of poor countries like a cloud of locusts. ... Now that the family secret has been spilled, the twins are blurring into one another and gradually becoming interchangeable.⁹

Arundhati Roy goes on to say that Bush and Osama bin Laden have gro-





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tesquely merged into the same thing. They

Borrow each other's rhetoric. ... Both invoke God and use loose millenarian currency of good and evil. ... Both are dangerously armed—one with the nuclear arsenal of the obscenely powerful, the other with the incandescent, destructive power of the utterly hopeless. The fireball and the ice pick. The bludgeon and the axe. The important thing to keep in mind is that neither is an acceptable alternative to the other.

Major adventurist elements high in the Bush administration were deeply committed to an invasion of Iran as a part of their grand scheme of invasion and regime-change throughout the region. Their goal was the creation of U.S.-dominated client states across the world economy's petro-center, and bringing about Middle Eastern "peace" by eliminating any governments who were supporting the Palestinians against Israel.¹⁰ They began a "soft war" against Iran that used a variety of lethal and non-lethal tools, including armed terrorist and separatist groups among the Kurds and the Beluchis, as well as more established mercenaries such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK). The MEK, also known by the acronyms, MKO and PMOI, already had a bad enough reputation to make the U.S. government's list of terrorist organizations. As of this writing although the Council of the European Union removed it from its list in January 2009, it remains on the U.S. list.

Following the Republican defeats in the 2006 and 2008 elections, the Obama administration has understandably scaled back on most of Bush's grandiose visions, but it has also intensified covert actions against Iran. As Mark Mazzetti reports in the *New York Times* (May 24, 2010), on September 30, 2010, the CENTCOM commander, General Petraeus, signed a directive called the *Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Force Execute Order* that authorized expanded military activities in Iran. Here are some striking parts of Mazzetti's report:

The seven-page directive appears to authorize specific operations in Iran, most likely to gather intelligence about the country's nuclear program or identify dissident groups that might be useful for a future military offensive. The Obama administration insists that for the moment, it is committed to penalizing Iran for its nuclear activities only with diplomatic and economic sanctions. Nevertheless, the Pentagon has to draw up detailed war plans to





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be prepared in advance, in the event that President Obama ever authorizes a strike. ... General Petraeus' September order is focused on intelligence gathering—by American troops, foreign businesspeople, academics or others—to identify militants and provide “persistent situational awareness,” while forging ties to local indigenous groups.¹¹

Flynt and Hillary Leverett are two of the most sensible and intelligent commentators on U.S.-Iran relations. Both have had distinguished careers in American diplomatic and intelligence establishments, and their blog, www.raceforiran.com is among the very best available. The Leveretts' analysis and opinions are well worth considering. Referring to Mazzetti's report, they write:

If that is American policy, exactly how should Iran deal with three Americans who entered the Islamic Republic, without visas, by crossing the Iraq-Iranian border in an area with no immigration checkpoint? If what Mazzetti reports is American policy, why is every American academic who visits Iran not a legitimate subject of concern for Iranian security agencies? ... In our criticism of President Obama's early decision to continue the anti-Iranian covert programs he inherited from his predecessor, we compared his lack of strategic vision to the statesmanship of President Richard Nixon—who, on coming to the White House in 1969, ordered the CIA to stand down from a longstanding covert action program in Tibet, to show Beijing that he was serious about rapprochement with the People's Republic of China. As we predicted early on, Obama is, unfortunately, headed in exactly the opposite direction. President Obama's policies are not only generating risks for innocent, non-official Americans. They are further eroding the already deteriorating prospects for an improvement in U.S. – Iranian relations—and increasing the chances of an eventual U.S. – Iranian military confrontation.¹²

Obama's peaceful gestures towards Iran have never gone beyond the sound bite stage. In a prophetic piece, published in the *New York Times* (May 24, 2009), the Leveretts pointed out that he has done nothing to persuade the Iranian government to take him seriously. He has, if anything, intensified covert actions against Iran. His Secretary Of State, Hillary Clinton, threatened to “obliterate Iran” during her presidential campaign.¹³ Obama then appointed Dennis Ross, a longtime Israeli sup-





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porter,¹⁴ as the point person for Iran policy at the State Department. Obama ended up, in the words of the Leveretts, with

an only slightly prettified version of George W. Bush's approach—that is, an effort to contain perceived Iranian threats without actually trying to resolve underlying political conflicts. ... Some diplomatic veterans who have spoken with him have told us that the president said that he did not realize, when he came to office, how “hard” the Iran problem would be. But what is hard about the Iran problem is ... that getting America's Iran policy “right” would require a president to take the position that some allies and domestic constituencies won't like.¹⁵

The Leveretts are right, but coy about it. By “some allies and domestic constituencies” in the above quotation, of course, they mean Israel and the AIPAC—with its Jewish and Christian fundamentalist and apocalyptic wings.

The bottom line to all of this is that Obama's election hasn't altered Iran's situation for the better. Only chronic Fox-News watchers and some left-wing daydreamers ever mistook the new president for a liberal. Sanctions remain in place and have been intensified, unsubstantiated accusations and lies against our country fly freely, and most of Obama's messages to our people have proven to be no more than meaningless rhetorical maneuvers. If anything, Obama and his Secretary of State have upped the anti by repeatedly dangling an implied threat of a nuclear strike over Iran's head. The *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, published by the U.S. Department of Defense in April of 2010, clearly stipulates that:

[the] United States is now prepared to strengthen its long-standing “negative security assurance” by declaring that the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the NPT *and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations*. ... In the case of countries not covered by this assurance—states that possess nuclear weapons *and states not in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations*—there remains a narrow range of contingencies in which U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring a conventional or CBW attack against the United States or its allies and partners. *The United States is therefore not prepared at the present time to adopt a universal*



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policy that deterring nuclear attack is the sole purpose of nuclear weapons. [p. viii; emphasis added].

Stripped of its duplicity and double-talk, the official American position is that the U.S. reserves the right to attack non-nuclear states that it unilaterally proclaims *not* in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.¹⁶ This is a loophole through which an army of occupation—or a fleet of nuclear bombers—can easily pass.

After what America unleashed upon the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, no human being can threaten a society with nuclear holocaust and remain moral. Obama and his advisors are as dangerous to Iran as Bush and Osama bin Laden because they refuse to abandon the deceitful policies and the double standards that have already involved the U.S. in two disastrous regional wars. Obama's advisors are frequently the same as Bush's. They are people of divided loyalties: men and women who place their ideology, and America's historic and unconditional support of Israel, ahead of U.S. national interests. Such establishment *apparatchiks* concern themselves with getting and keeping power—they don't have much time for moral considerations. Their behavior personifies what Hannah Arendt, in her book about the mass-murdering Nazi bureaucrat Eichmann, called "the banality of evil." Arendt explains what she means:

Some years ago, reporting the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, I spoke of "the banality of evil" and meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behavior during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think.¹⁷

Politicians and media whores threaten to annihilate our country in front of the cheering Zionists and Fundamentalists of AIPAC and the Christian Coalition because of the financial and political support that these





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pressure groups can provide—*not* because such an act would be in the national interest of the United States. They hazily understand what it would mean to bomb Tehran with its thirteen million civilians; they simply either don't care or have convinced themselves that the "suicidal and irrational Iranians" are bound to attack Israel if not stopped. Let me give you a context for my statement that U.S. policy-makers are not curtailed by moral considerations.

At the end of World War II, U.S. policy-makers were debating whether to drop the newly-created atomic bomb on Japan. General Dwight Eisenhower, commander of all Allied Forces in Europe, opposed the bombing because it served no military purpose. He was ignored, and the bombs were dropped because upper-echelon, U.S. decision-makers were interested in the "psychological and emotional impact" of this utterly devastating weapon. The bomb "was meant to shock and demoralize not only the Japanese population," which was on the verge of surrender anyway, "but also the Soviets" whom the American political leadership aimed to intimidate.

The American military planners picked Hiroshima because the bombers would face less anti-aircraft fire. They calculated that the effect of obliterating a huge civilian population would be dramatic and terrifying. The "Strategic Bombing Survey," conducted at President Harry Truman's request after the bomb hit Hiroshima on April 6, 1945, noted that "nearly all the school children ... were in the open," to be exploded, irradiated or incinerated in the perfect firestorm. Thousands of children on their way to school in Hiroshima and Nagasaki died. It had, as the planners at the University of California-run Los Alamos Lab envisioned, the maximum psychological impact.¹⁸

Threats of using nuclear weapons against Iran are, of course, rationalized by alleging that President Ahmadinejad has threatened to destroy Israel. The accusation is a lie: anyone who understands Persian knows it. But like other lies the U.S. has used to justify attacking other nations—such as the Gulf of Tonkin incident¹⁹ and Saddam Hossein's fictitious WMDs—it's the kind of lie that rationalizes a pre-determined course of action and alleviates guilt. Much of America's agitated and distracted population might not mind seeing what a large metropolis like Tehran





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would look like after a nuclear strike. Everything is a video game to these people. Since those of you who were born and raised in the U.S. on slasher- movies and violent videogames are probably just as jaded and fascinated by carnage, let me give you a glimpse of it. This is what the mayor of Hiroshima, Tadatoshi Akiba, had to say on August 6, 2007, on the anniversary of his city's destruction:

The roar of a B – 29 breaks the morning calm. A parachute opens in the blue sky. Then suddenly, a flash, an enormous blast—silence—hell on Earth. The eyes of young girls watching the parachute were melted. Their faces became giant charred blisters. The skin of people seeking help dangled from their fingernails. Their hair stood on end. Their clothes were ripped to shreds. People trapped in houses toppled by the blast were burned alive. Others died when their eyeballs and internal organs burst from their bodies—Hiroshima was a hell where those who somehow survived envied the dead.

Within the year, 140,000 had died. Many who escaped death initially are still suffering from leukemia, thyroid cancer, and a vast array of other afflictions ... The annihilation of 140,000 people at Hiroshima and 70,000 at Nagasaki (overwhelmingly civilians), the deaths of thousands of others from radiation sickness and the obliteration of two cities was considered appropriate retaliation for an air raid on a military target that killed fewer than 2,500. ... [In all,] 370,000 overall deaths [were] attributed to the bombings.²⁰

Iranian immigrants who have duped themselves into thinking of their own country's government as the "enemy," and of the U.S. as their salvation, will do well to consider the ongoing carnage in Iraq and Afghanistan, two countries that are currently enjoying this brand of American salvation.

The number of Iraqi civilians killed as a direct result of the American invasion is hotly contested. But no matter which end of the spectrum you choose to believe, the sheer tragedy is mind-boggling. The conservative independent observer, *Iraq Body Count* (see <http://www.iraqbodycount.org>) estimates that between 96,050-104,767 Iraqi civilians were killed as a direct result of the U.S. invasion. Britain's most prestigious medical journal, *The Lancet*, placed the number at over 600,000 as of June 2006. Others have estimated civilian deaths to reach 1,033,000 (August 2007), and 1,500,000 (by 2010). Whatever the correct number may be,





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assuming the population of Iraq at about 31,000,000, at least somewhere between 0.32% and 4.8% of Iraqi civilians have been killed because of the American invasion. But that's not all. For every individual who is killed in war, there are many more who are injured, orphaned, widowed, or displaced from their homes—with their lives ruined, as the living once again envy the dead. Add all that up, and the human suffering reaches staggering heights.

Those Iranian expatriates who advocate a similar “rescue package” from the safety of their Western perch, do not understand that 0.32% or 4.8% of Iran's 74,000,000 population translates to between 236,800 and 3,552,000 civilian dead. As in Iraq, a great many more will lose their homes and livelihoods, suffer terrible injuries, and be victimized by fearful and violent alien occupiers. The point to keep in mind for all those who feel any connection to their homeland, is that these obscene numbers are entirely acceptable to American policy makers and to the general public of this country. This is not a personal opinion. It may be easily supported from the statements and behavior of the U.S. politicians.

Madeline Albright, Bill Clinton's Secretary of State, was interviewed on the CBS's *60 Minutes* program on May 11, 1996 by Lesley Stahl; this is the gist of the conversation:

Lesley Stahl said, “We have heard that a half a million children have died as a result of the sanctions [in Iraq]. That's more than died in Hiroshima. ... Is the price worth it?” Albright replied, “I think this is a very hard choice, but we think the price is worth it.”²¹

This comment, coming from one of the Establishment moderates is not far from right-wing harpy Ann Coulter's now famous statement about Muslims: “we should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity” (*National Review Online*, September 2001).

An analysis of the air war in Operation Desert Storm, published by the *Washington Post* (June 23, 1991) quotes unnamed senior officers in charge of strategic bombing to have said:

The worst civilian suffering, senior officers say, has resulted not from bombs that went astray but from precision-guided weapons that hit exactly where



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they were aimed—at electrical plants, oil refineries and transportation networks. Each of these targets was acknowledged during the war, but all the purposes and consequences of their destruction were not divulged. ... “When they discuss warfare, a lot of folks tend to think of force on force, soldier A against soldier B,” said another officer who played a central role in the air campaign but declined to be named. Strategic bombing, by contrast, strikes against “all those things that allow a nation to sustain itself.”²²

But war has costs that go beyond carnage. Iraqi antiquities and cultural sites have fared no better than Iraqi civilians in the American invasion. There are lessons here for those Iranian residents of the West who favor their country’s invasion by foreign troops. One of the greatest costs of foreign invasion is the damage done to cultural and archeological sites, to universities, libraries, and museums or other cultural centers. In an article entitled “Troops ‘Vandalize’ Ancient City of Ur,” published in the *Observer*, (May 18, 2003), Ed Vullimay reports that the American Marines spray-painted their motto, *Semper Fi* onto the walls of the city’s massive ziggurat, which was built between 2112 and 2095 B.C., and was renovated by Nibuchadnezzar II in the sixth century B.C..²³ The U.S. military chose the area adjacent to this ancient site, near the modern city of Nasiriyah, to built its colossal Tallil Airbase with its huge runways and four satellite camps.

In the process, military engineers moved more than 9,500 truckloads of dirt in order to build 350,000 square feet of hangars and other facilities for aircraft and Predator unmanned drones. They completely ruined the area, the literal heartland of human civilization, for any further archaeological research or future tourism. They did, however, erect their own American imperial ziggurats. On October 24, 2003, according to the Global Security Organization, the army and air force “opened its second Burger King at Tallil. The new facility, co-located with [a] ... Pizza Hut, provides another Burger King restaurant so that more service men and women serving in Iraq, if only for a moment, forget about the task at hand in the desert and get a whiff of that familiar scent that takes them home.”²⁴

The American record elsewhere in Iraq is no better. At Babylon, American and Polish forces built a military depot, despite objections from archaeologists. John Curtis, the British Museum’s authority on Iraq’s many archae-





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ological sites, reported that, on a visit in December 2004, he saw “cracks and gaps where somebody had tried to gouge out the decorated bricks forming the famous dragons of the Ishtar Gate” and a “2,600-year-old brick pavement crushed by military vehicles.”²⁵ Other observers say that the dust stirred up by U.S. helicopters has sandblasted the fragile brick façade of the palace of Nebuchadnezzar II, king of Babylon from 605 to 562 B.C..²⁶ The archaeologist Zainab Bahrani reports, “Between May and August 2004, the wall of the Temple of Nabu and the roof of the Temple of Ninmah, both of the sixth century B.C., collapsed as a result of the movement of helicopters. Nearby, heavy machines and vehicles stand parked on the remains of a Greek theater from the era of Alexander of Macedon [Alexander the Great].”²⁷

The American military contacted the Archeological Institute of America and other archeologists several years later in order to request information about archeological sites in Iran. One of these archeologists was Zainab Bahrani, who had gone to Iraq independently in 2003 to help preserve the country's cultural heritage. “When that news reached me,” said Ms. Bahrani, “I said, leave me out. I'm not giving you a single site.”²⁸

Lawrence Rothfield, a former director of the Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago and an Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at that school, has discussed the matter in a scholarly and sensitive volume, which he begins with the sentence: “This book arose from an intense feeling of guilt.”²⁹ My point is that Iranians who identify with their country's national epic, or feel any connection to their homeland at all—regardless of their political views and ideological preferences—cannot reasonably advocate the invasion, isolation, or violation of their homeland by any foreign power and remain Iranian. Neither the U.S. nor any of her allies have Iran's best interest at heart. They are not even interested in pursuing a live-and-let-live policy with our country. What they want is complete dominance over the entire area and total control over our natural resources. The *Shāhnāmeḥ*, using the symbolic language of literature, is quite explicit on the dangers of foreign domination. It tells us what a huge cost in blood and treasure will be exacted when dragons are invited in. The miserable and tragic lives of civilian populations in Iraq and Afghanistan are daily reminders of this unfortunate fact.

We Iranians may think of ourselves as a people ethnically and cultur-





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ally distinct from our Arab neighbors. That means nothing to the culturally illiterate American soldier. To the twenty-year-old Marine, chock full of junk food, beer, testosterone and ignorance—and scared out of his wits in a foreign land—we're all the same: "Johnny Jihads," "Fuck-ing Hajis," "Ragheads," "Sand Niggers," and "Ali Babas." With his finger on the trigger of a heavy M – 240 Bravo machine gun; an AT-launcher, or a Mark 19—a machine gun that rapidly fires grenades—the young American Marine does not make distinctions. He only knows, what Iraq veteran, Sgt. Camilo Mejia, reported to Chris Hedges about soldiers who shot holes into cans of gasoline being sold alongside the road and tossed incendiary grenades to ignite them into firebombs. They said: "it's fun to shoot the shit up."³⁰ In view of all this, it is the notion that so many of us harbor, namely, the idea that we are somehow different from our Arab neighbors, that I want to discuss in my final chapter.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See his divan, pp.119, 245, 249, etc.
- 2 E.g., pp.55, 197, 201, 229, etc.
- 3 E.g., Farrokhi's Divan, pp.116, 125, 138, 200; and Manuchehri's Divan, p.91, etc.
- 4 E.g., Qatrān's Divan, pp.2, 20, 46; Mas'ud-e Sa'd's Divan, vol.1, pp.10, 460 ; vol.2, p.1004, etc.
- 5 In fact, for those of you who are partial to Benedict Anderson's arguments, Western nations were "imagined" into existence quite recently. See Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
- 6 Patrick J. Geary. *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.16.
- 7 *Handbook of British Chronology*. Ed. E. B. Fryde et al., 3rd edition (London : Royal Historical Society, 1986), p.25, cited in Geoffrey Elton, *The English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p.1.
- 8 *The Times Guide to the Peoples of Europe*. Ed. Felipe Fernández-Armesto (London: Times Books, 1994), pp.94-96.
- 9 Sited in Chalmers Johnson. *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Empire* (New York, Holt Paperbacks, 2006), p.1. The date of publication for Arundhati Roy's article, "The Algebra of Infinite Justice," is given as September 27, 2001 in Johnson's book. However, the internet version of the *Guardian* indicates that it was published on Saturday, September 29, 2001. See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/29/september11.afghanistan> (retrieved on 05/06/2010).
- 10 I am indebted to my editor, Larry Vogt who reminded me of the relevance of this point. See Seymour Hersh's many enlightening reports, e.g., http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/04/17/060417fa_fact; and <http://www.michaelmoore.com/words/must-read/seymour-hersh-obama-being-dominated-us-military>
- 11 See Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Is Said to Expand Secret Actions in Mideast," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2010; <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/world/25military.html>





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- 12 See Flynt Leverett and Hilary Mann Leverett, "Obama Steps Up America's Covert War Against Iran," in <http://www.raceforiran.com/obama-steps-up-america%E2%80%99s-covert-war-against-iran>, posted on May 25th, 2010.
- 13 Reported in *Timesonline*, April 23, 2008: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/us_elections/article3793047. ece; and in April 22, 2008 by the Reuters: <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN2224332720080422>
- 14 According to a report in the *Institute for Policy Studies* (IPS, www.ips.dc.org), an unnamed official describes Ross as "more sensitive to Netanyahu's coalition politics than to U.S. interests. See: http://www.rightweb.irc-online.org/profile/Ross_Dennis. A major problem of almost every American administration since the Carter administration is that those who are supposed to represent the national interests of the United States in negotiations with Palestinians, tend to be American Jews with divided loyalties, who place the security and interest of Israel ahead of those of the U.S. Ross is no exception. As far as Ross and people like him are concerned, the existence of an independent Iran threatens Israel's hegemony over the region. To their minds, that is enough to do everything to stop Iran even at the cost of endangering the long-term interests of the U.S. Naturally, any objection to their view would be classified as "anti-Semitic" and dismissed or discredited by using this old and effective weapon in the arsenal of the western Zionists.
- 15 Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, "Have We Already Lost Iran? *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/24/opinion/24leverett.html?_r=1
- 16 See also, the Leveretts' April 5, 2010 post in their blog: "Is Iran Now a Nuclear Target for the United States?" <http://www.raceforiran.com/is-iran-now-a-nuclear-target-for-the-united-states>
- 17 Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, edited and with an introduction by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), pp.159-189, p.159.
- 18 Hedges, *I Don't Believe in Atheists*, pp. 149, 151.
- 19 This was an alleged attack by Vietnamese patrol boats on U.S. naval ships in the Gulf of Tonkin, which the U.S. used as a pretext to invade Vietnam. See Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), pp.239-243.
- 20 Tadatashi Akiba, Mayor of Hiroshima. Peace Declaration. August 6, 2007. <http://www.pcf.city.hiroshima.jp/declaration/English/2007/index.html> retrieved on May 7, 2010. Also cited in Chris Hedges' *I Don't Believe in Atheists*, pp.149-151.
- 21 Chalmers Johnson. *Nemesis*, p.25.
- 22 Barton Gellman, "Allied Air War Struck Broadly in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, June 23, 1991. The text of the article is available online at: <http://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/169/36375.html>
- 23 Cited in Chalmers Johnson's, *Nemesis*, p.51.
- 24 See: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/tallil.htm>, cited in Johnson, *Nemesis*, pp.51-52.
- 25 See Rory McCarthy and Maev Kennedy, "Babylon Wrecked by War," in *Guardian*, January 15, 2005: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/jan/15/iraq.arts1>, retrieved on 5/8/2010. Cited in Johnson, *Nemesis*, p.52.
- 26 Owen Bowcott, "Archaeologists Fight to Save Iraqi Sites," *Guardian*, June 20, 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2005/jun/20/iraq.theartsworldandtheiraqcrisis>
- 27 Zainab Bahrani, "The Fall of Babylon," in *The Looting of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad: The Lost Legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia*, edited by Polk, Milbry and Angela M. H. Schuster (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 2005), p.214. Cited in Johnson, *Nemesis*, p.52.





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- 28 Lawrence Rothfield, "Preserving Iraq's Heritage from Looting: What Went Wrong (within the United States)," in *Antiquities Under Siege: Cultural Heritage Protection After the Iraq War*, ed. Lawrence Rothfield (Lanham MD: Altamira Press, 2008), p.22. See also, Neil Brodie, "The Western Market in Iraqi Antiquities," in Rothfield, *Antiquities Under Siege*, p.72.
- 29 Lawrence Rothfield. *The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. lx.
- 30 Chris Hedges and Laila al-Arian. *Collateral Damage: America's War Against Iraqi Civilians* (New York: Nation Books, 2008), pp.xxii-xxiii.





Chapter 9



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Once, an American friend of mine, a retired professor and internationally recognized scholar in his own field, compared the *Shāhnāme*'s place in Iranian civilization to the Old Testament in Jewish culture. This is a generally reasonable comparison; both books are intimately connected to the ethnic identities of the peoples who cherish them. There is, however, a fundamental difference. The Old Testament is quintessentially religious; it belongs to the realm of the sacred, and its very existence as a holy book depends on a specific religious credo that has established and maintained it as a sacred narrative. Thus, at least as scripture, the Old Testament depends on a community of believers who perpetuate it; and if Judaism as a religion were to disappear, the Old Testament as a central text of Jewish identity will also cease to exist.

In contrast, the *Shāhnāme* has no religious significance; it is independent of Iranians' religious orientation, and can maintain its cultural centrality regardless of what creed Iranians may follow. As we have seen in our brief review of Iranian history, Persians largely—and wholeheartedly—converted to Islam after the Arab conquest. However, since their culture's central narrative—the legends preserved and made so idiomatically vivid in the *Shāhnāme*—was not a *religious* narrative, they managed to retain their ethnic identity in spite of conversion to a new religion.

Samuel M. Stern, a noted Oxford Fellow in Islamic studies, persuasively argued that all other Middle Eastern populations became "Arabs" after the Muslim conquest *because* their ethnic identities were either ex-





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clusively or largely determined by their religions. This meant that as they changed religion by conversion to Islam, they also changed ethnicities, and in becoming Muslims, they also became Arabs. The Egyptians, for instance, who saw themselves as Monophysite Christians distinct from their Orthodox Byzantine overlords, abandoned Monophysitism as the core of their ethnic identity when they converted to Islam. Thus, their religiously-derived ethnic identity coalesced around a new sacred text and a new religious tradition that was Arabic. As a result, their ethnic identity was gradually transformed into an Arabic identity under the influence of their newly adopted Arabic religion.¹ Only the Iranians remained attached to their pre-Islamic ethnic character. The ancestral Persian lore that defined who they were—both in its oral and textual versions—was a secular tradition that could continue to serve as the focus of their cultural identification, regardless of what religion they chose to follow.²

Of course, it is not difficult for an Iranian who has spent most of his adult life studying the *Shāhnāme* to extravagantly praise the poem, or to pronounce it the Persian culture's central text. Such a pronouncement is also not likely to be terribly persuasive to others. So, let me quote the judgment of someone who is neither a *Shāhnāme* specialist, nor can be considered necessarily friendly to Iran.

The mutual hostility between Iran and Israel hardly needs to be documented any more. Israeli threats of preemptive military strikes against Iran have been so frequent in recent years that they are now routine and largely meaningless. Opinion polls show that the majority of Israelis share their government's hyperbolic description of Iran as an "existential threat" to their country. Therefore, the evaluation of the *Shāhnāme*'s role as central to Iranian culture by an Israeli citizen, cannot be viewed as tainted by either good will or favoritism.

Uri Lubrani served as the head of Israel's mission to Tehran in 1973. He was born in Germany in 1926, joined the Haganah, the paramilitary organization that was the forerunner of the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces), and finally went into foreign service. In the course of his career he served in a number of high-level diplomatic positions, and also as an advisor to Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973). Lubrani's views about Israel's relationship with a number of regional countries, and





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his expertise in intelligence matters, are highly respected by various diplomatic and intelligence agencies in the West. I provide this brief background to properly contextualize his opinion of the *Shāhnāme*'s role in Persian culture. In October of 2004, while he was being interviewed by a scholar, Mr. Lubrani said the following about his impressions of Iran, during his first visit to the country:

I visited a small village. It was a poor village; they didn't have running water and other basic facilities. But in the evening, the villagers gathered to hear one of their elders recite the *Shahnameh*. The scene of these poor villagers listening to this man reciting the *Shahnameh* by heart had a lasting impact on me. Iran wasn't rich, it wasn't developed, but it was a civilization.³

The scholar who interviewed Lubrani, goes on to point out that the diplomat became one of Israel's foremost experts on Iran, and that "his understanding of and admiration for Iranian culture deeply effected Israel's view of Iran" as an ally—under the Shah—and as an adversary, since the Islamic Revolution. Now, let me briefly recap the *Shāhnāme*'s place within Iranians' national consciousness, in the context of Iran's relationships with the outside world.

Because the *Shāhnāme* and Ferdowsi have attained iconic status as symbols of Iranian cultural nationalism, they have been frequently used in political propaganda. I have already presented the evidence of how the allies drew upon the *Shāhnāme* for their propaganda aimed at Iranians during World War II. In this chapter, I would like to draw your attention to a more sinister series of distortions and self-delusions on the part of Iranians themselves, who subvert the book's history and its creator's character for their own political aims. I'm not a political analyst nor do I write to promote the views of any political group or party. In fact, during the past quarter century, I have never wandered away from my specific and narrow areas of specialization—textual and literary criticism of Persian texts from the tenth through the thirteenth centuries A.D. However, like Iraj Afshar to whom this book is dedicated, I am also an unabashed cultural nationalist who is alarmed by the prevalence of several dangerous myths among Persian residents of the West. These alien cultural delusions





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are rationalized by those who promote them among the unsuspecting and uninformed by what can only be called an abuse of the *Shāhnāme* and its creator.

I. Iran and Islam: A Fruitful Union:

One of the most sinister political uses of the *Shāhnāme* is the insinuation that the poem is anti-Islamic, anti-Arab, or anti-Turkish. Those who promote this interpretation of the epic are in effect portraying Iran's religion and her national poem as being at odds with one another. As I pointed out before, Iranians are told that Ferdowsi composed his poem as a "nationalist response" to the Muslim conquest, that he deliberately avoided Arabic vocabulary in his verse, and that he "created" the *Shāhnāme* in order to glorify the ancient religion of his ancestors over the invaders' religion. As I hope to have shown in the previous chapters, none of these assertions withstand the slightest scrutiny, nor are any of them supported by any verifiable facts about the cultural and personal circumstances of Ferdowsi. Iranian people's Shiism and their national epic belong to separate conceptual realms. Our ethnic identity depends on a body of *secular* lore that does not compete against what we hold as sacred—and is not impeded by it.

Many Iranians associate the *Shāhnāme* with Zoroastrianism, that is, with the ancient religion of pre-Islamic Iran. That is simply wrong. The *Shāhnāme* is *not* a Zoroastrian epic. It has neither a Zoroastrian agenda nor does it glorify Persia's old religions. It is a national narrative that simply tells the story of the country and her people in a secular voice. The best proof of the *Shāhnāme*'s non-religious character is the fact that one of the most respected personages in Zoroastrian faith, Zoroaster's patron, King Goshtāsp, is also one of the most despised kings of the epic. At the same time, the poem's most exalted character, namely the hero Rostam, is practically excised from Zoroastrian narrative tradition. In fact the Zoroastrian tradition turns Rostam into a non-person who is hardly mentioned at all. It also transforms Rostam's valiant grandfather, the hero Garshāsp, into an impious sinner. Garshāsp is kept out of heaven, and in a state of limbo between life and death, by a conspiracy of gods who find his heroic behavior objectionable.⁴





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But the most striking evidence of the *Shāhnāme*'s non-Zoroastrian character is the poem's depiction of burial customs. Zoroastrian funerary practices require that the corpse be exposed in specially built enclosures that are called *towers of silence* in English. By contrast, the *Shāhnāme* dead are given quite fancy burials, preceded by extensive handling of the corpse, which is finally laid to rest in elaborately built and decorated tombs. Zoroastrianism considers dead matter abhorrent and avoids all contact with it. Zoroastrians would never consider cutting the body open to extract its organs, and packing all bodily cavities with aromatic substance, as *Shāhnāme* characters do. As always, look at the facts. Those who speak of the *Shāhnāme*'s Zoroastrian world-view know nothing about Zoroastrian practices and even less about the *Shāhnāme*.

Now, it is true that pre-Islamic Iran's secular heroic tradition also had a parallel priestly version. However, as I pointed out before, when Zoroastrianism was replaced by Islam, that religious epic gradually disappeared, leaving mere hints of itself in the few religious texts that survived the conversion. By contrast, secular epic tales continued intact, and in the fullness of time gave birth to Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme*.

It goes without saying that a society's national and religious epic traditions may, and quite often do, interact. We know, for instance, that pre-Islamic Persian religions drew on her ancient epics as support for a variety of theological, ethical, and didactic issues. For instance, pre-Zoroastrian gods and heroes such as *Yama* (*Jam* in the *Shāhnāme*) and *Keresaspa* (*Garshāsp* of the epic tradition), were adopted into Zoroastrianism as Iranians abandoned their olden pagan lore for the religion of Zoroaster. Later, the Manichean heretics drew on epic tales for proselytizing purposes. Then, under Islam, Rostam, Keykhosrow, and a number of other pre-Islamic kings and heroes were assimilated into Shiite folklore, and have been pressed into the service of Iran's new religion in its folk version.⁵ It is clear then, that Iran's epic tradition does not stand in opposition to her religion; it simply is not concerned with religious issues. As a secular tradition, the *Shāhnāme* has a national, *not* a religious agenda.

The notion that Islam and Iran are inherently antithetical is a delusion created by those whom Professor Iraj Afshar calls: "the quack intellectuals" (دوشنفر عامی). These are people who are usually unfamiliar with the details





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of their homeland's culture and history; their knowledge of Persian literature is gained by undisciplined and unsupervised research. In the course of their dabbling, they have picked up a lot of facile slogans, and have mistaken them for fact. These intellectual bootleggers tirelessly pour their poisonous potion of half-truths and errors into the ears of gullible expatriates. According to their perverted version of Iranian cultural history, Iran—symbolized by Ferdowsi and his poem—and Islam are antagonists. They conveniently neglect the mass of facts to the contrary. For instance, the fact that Ferdowsi's devout Muslim faith is itself the best proof of the harmonious relationship between Iran's religion and her heroic tradition. But there is a more damaging aspect to this bogus dichotomy which pits Iran against Islam. Let's take a few moments to consider it now.

Whatever anyone may think, and whether they like it or not, Iran has been a Muslim country for most of its history. That is, nearly 1400 out of the nation's 2500 years of recorded history have passed with Iran securely within Islam. During this period, Iran has produced some of the most important poets, scientists, philosophers, artists, and theologians in Islamic culture. Many personages who are cherished not only by Iranians, but also by the whole Muslim world, are ethnic Iranians. Persian art, architecture, and science have exerted a profound influence on the development and character of Muslim civilization, and have, in turn, been deeply influenced by it. An Iranian who wants to reject, disown, or otherwise turn away from his country's monumental contributions to Islam, must at the same time renounce the most culturally vibrant and productive period of his nation's past. To put it bluntly, Iranians who reject the Islamic civilization of Iran also reject the vast contributions of *all* their country's poets, scientists, philosophers, and artisans. They disown Ferdowsi, Avicenna, Rāzi, Khayyam, Biruni, and the myriad other luminaries who were nursed in the bosom of Persia's Muslim civilization. Through this renunciation, they wind up practicing a strange form of self-service "ethnic cleansing" that discredits and demeans the culture that they claim to love.

The pseudo-nationalism that drives some of our countrymen to irrational anti-Islamism is rooted in two main causes: the self-contempt that many peoples who came into contact with Western colonialism have





experienced; and a profound ignorance of Iranian cultural history after the Muslim conquest.

II. The White Wannabees:

The Iranian-American comedian, Maz Jobrani, performs a piece about Iranians and Arabs in which he tells of how Iranians don't like to be called "Arabs." In this performance, he says, "we're not Arabs. We're Aryans. We are white."⁶

Mr. Jobrani's idea that Iranians are "Aryans" is shared by most of our countrymen, and is responsible for a fair amount of ethnocentrism among them. But the terms "Aryan" and "White" have nasty connotations in the West that they lack in Iran. Those Persians who use these terms do not seem to fully appreciate their racist implications in the Western world. Their ignorance of what Western racism really means is why I hesitate to call these folks "racists." Let me explain the problem as I see it.

Iranians recently acquired feelings of racial superiority towards all "others," and the notion of themselves as "Aryans," has no roots in traditional Persian culture. Contrary to what the word "Aryan" denotes in Western cultures, Iranians' feeling of superiority is a benign form of ethnocentrism that has never led to bloodshed. There is no doubt that we have practiced our share of atrocities over our long history. Cities were razed and their inhabitants put to the sword, villages burned, and lives destroyed. But, none of this was done in the name of race, or because the victims had a different skin-color, or belonged to a despised ethnic group. Iranian brutality was motivated by our leaders' political considerations, or the religious zeal of mindless masses. There was no theory behind it that served to justify or excuse the blood letting. This is in sharp contrast to the West, where Nazi racial theories justified outrages against Jews and others, and where the American and Spanish colonialists justified the systematic eradication of the New World's native peoples, and the brutal enslavement of Africans—especially those shipped to the New World through the horrors of the so-called "Middle Passage"—by recourse to theory.

Although cruelty is not a Western or Eastern phenomenon, the racially motivated barbarity of Europeans has no parallel in the history of





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the Middle East, and certainly not in Iranian history. No doubt political oppression and its attendant cruelties are widespread in the region, especially in countries ruled by oligarchies that are supported by the West. But the cold, calculating and systematic eradication of whole peoples and ethnic groups is a chiefly European phenomenon that is alien to our way of life. The difference between us and the brutal Westerner is the Iranian attitude toward the “other”; which grew out of an ancient Imperial tradition where ethnic diversity was the norm. Racially and culturally isolated Europeans’ attitudes evolved from a more insular experience, a more limited understanding of who constituted “us,” and who was a member of the “other” group. Throw in the more tribal, savage and heartless tradition of Teutonic bloodlust and you will have the perfect recipe for disaster. The devastation that European racism and its attendant myth of “Aryan” or “white” superiority practiced upon India, Africa, North, South and Central America, and even upon Europe herself, approaches depths of barbarity unimaginable by Iranians. Let me give you a specific example.

According to the historian Gardizi, in the 1050’s several thousand Turcoman tribesmen secured the permission of Ferdowsi’s patron, King Mahmud, to cross into Iran from Transoxiana in order to live there. The permission was granted sometime in the year 1025. Soon afterward, one of Mahmud’s generals reproachfully tells the king:

Why did you permit these Turcomans to enter the realm? This was a grave error. But now that you have let them in, either kill them all, or let me cut off their thumbs so that they cannot use bows and arrows. King Mahmud, God rest his soul, was amazed by the general’s statements, and said: Truly you are a cruel and heartless man. Thereafter, the general responded: If you don’t do as I say, you will be exceedingly sorry.⁷

Mahmud’s reaction to a policy of genocide should be compared to the heartless behavior of European leaders during the Holocaust, and most recently to secretary Albright’s assertion that causing the death of 500,000 Iraqi infants is acceptable, or to Hillary Clinton’s explicit threat of using nuclear bombs against Iran to please her AIPAC supporters. It should also be remembered that Mahmud was no pacifist. He was a sea-





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soned veteran of many wars and had ordered massacres when they served his political purposes. But never for racial reasons. No Middle Eastern leader of the classical period did.

It is for these reasons, and many more, that Iranians who proclaim themselves “Aryan” or “White” are rejecting their ethnicity—not confirming it. They become something that has no roots in their culture and history. They become *wannabe whites*, who turn away from their own culture and choose instead to be fake Europeans.

We Iranians are a lot of things, but “Aryan” is not one of them. The word, *Aryan* is not listed in *An Etymological Dictionary of Persian Language* that was published by the Iranian Academy of Persian Language and Literature (Tehran, 2005). Even the older *Dehkhoda Lexicon*, which cites evidence from classical Persian poetry and prose for virtually every word in Persian, does not list either the word *āryā* or its adjectival form *āriyā'i* «Ariyan.» There is a good reason for this: the concept does not exist in classical Persian literature. In other words, literary Persian quite sensibly lacks words for concepts it does not have. So where does this word come from? Let me give you a brief history of the word *aryan* in our culture.

Until about 2000 B.C., Indians and Iranians were essentially one ethnic group. They split up into two branches sometime around the end of the 3rd millennium B.C., and their common language also evolved into the Indic and Iranian branches. The words *ārya-* in Old Indic, and *arya-* in Old Iranian are self-designations these cultures used to set themselves apart from all the other Indo-European peoples known to them. Therefore, the idea of the Aryan, even when it did have an ethnic sense, was not in opposition to the Semite, or to the non-white, as the modern racists imagine it to be. It simply distinguished the Iranians' and Indians' common ancestors from neighboring peoples, regardless of their color or race.⁸

Although Darius the Great (522-486 B.C.) refers to himself as “Arya, of Aryan origin,”⁹ and Xerxes proclaims himself to be “a Persian, son of a Persian, Arya, of Aryan origin,” they both use the word *ciça*, “origin, descent,” which indicates that at the time, Arya had a wider ethnic sense than Persian (see *Arya* in EI). Herodotus' fifth century report that Medes





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“were called by all men Arians” in the past (Bk.7:62), implies that the ethnonym was already archaic at that time. Eventually, the Old Iranian form *arya* evolved into *ēr*, “noble” or “hero” in Middle Persian. The plural form of the word, *ērān*, may mean either “nobles, heroes,” or simply the “country of Iran.” This is all that the term *Aryan* has ever meant in Iranian culture and language. The rest is imported nonsense.

In spite of these facts, a surprisingly large number of middle class Iranians have bought into the racially charged Western interpretation of this ancient ethnonym, and, adding their personal grievances to the mishmash of misinformation, borrowed notions, and outright errors, have decided that rejecting Islam is tantamount to affirming their Iranian identity. Islam, to their way of thinking, is a “Semitic” religion, and should be rejected by virtue of that fact. These individuals see a reflection of an imaginary *Aryan* past in the *Shāhnāme*, which they misinterpret as anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and in the final analysis, xenophobic. But unlike the Nazis and white supremacists, whose feelings of racial superiority congealed into anti-Semitism and was focused on the Jews, Iranian ethnocentric hostility towards the “other” is projected more broadly. It covers the Arabs, the Turks, the Mongols, the Greeks, and anyone else who offends their nationalism for having conquered their homeland. Their prejudice has a strong nationalist, rather than racist, character.

Ironically, as Iranians, we are an amalgam of many peoples. What little remains in us from our old Indo-Iranian ancestors has combined with all those ethnicities that came to rest in our ancient land. And all these peoples have learned to identify with a unifying national myth that is preserved in the *Shāhnāme*. Therefore, the strange and alien notion of racial and cultural purity, so passionately pushed by the misinformed upon the misguided, is an illusion. This down-the-rabbit-hole nonsense is based on the kind of racial and cultural “purity” that has not existed in our world for millennia. Latching onto the idea of racial superiority, and adopting Europe’s disgraceful and appalling racism in order to degrade and disrespect Arabs and Islam amounts to shooting ourselves in the foot. Islam *is* the religion of Ferdowsi, Rumi, Khayyam, Hafiz, and all the other stars that light the Persian sky. Railing against “others” for whatever outrages we imagine them to have committed against us is





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contrary to our tradition of receptiveness to many cultures and peoples.

It is important for all of us to understand that we are not made *more* Iranian by adopting alien ideas of racial or cultural purity; but precisely the opposite, we are made *less* Iranian by it. The Persian ethnic and national identities are sustained by a sense of ourselves that transcends all racist notions. It is supported by a body of shared legends, preserved in its highest literary expression in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. This brings me back to Mr. Jobrani's statement that "We are Aryan, we are White;" to which I answer: We are no such thing. We are diverse. We don't need to be "white" or "Aryan" or anything of the sort. Being humans, being Iranian, should suffice.

III. In Search of Purity:

Hopefully, I've convinced you by now that the culturally alien notion of "racial purity" pushed upon the innocent in the name of Ferdowsi and his *Shāhnāmeḥ*, is not only against all that our culture is about, but is also essentially irrational. In fact, the irrationality of the idea may prove counterproductive and even dangerous to the aims of those who espouse the ideals of Iranian cultural nationalism. Let me demonstrate this by a concrete example.

No sane human being with any knowledge of modern history can either doubt the horrors of the Holocaust, nor belittle them by bickering over the exact body count of victims who perished in its fires. The devastation that this unbridled European bloodlust imposed upon the whole world is unparalleled in human history. Aside from disrupting human civilization on a global scale, the damage done to *Shāhnāmeḥ* studies by those who perpetrated this crime was quite immediate. The Holocaust took the life of Fritz Wolff (1880-1943), one of the greatest scholars of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. He was of Jewish origin, but had converted to Christianity many years before he was dragged to his death by Nazi butchers. I have no doubt that Wolff's murder profoundly damaged Iranian studies in general, and the *Shāhnāmeḥ* studies in particular. Wolff was killed *not* because he followed the Jewish religion. After his conversion, he was a Christian by any rational standards of classification. The problem is that racism is not rational. Now, compare the European's treatment of minori-





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ties with the way they have been treated in our culture.

Racial discrimination, against Blacks, Native Americans, Catholics, Jews, Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese, and virtually every other group was robustly and blatantly practiced in the United States until quite recently. What's more, as late as the first half of the 20th century, most Jews and other "undesirables" were purged out of their jobs in Nazi Germany, and later, in all the countries that came under German control. But over eighteen hundred years ago, in Iran, according to the Middle Persian *ayādgār-i zarērān*, when a foreign king sends a letter to Zoroaster's royal patron, it is *Āvrāhām-i dabirān-mahest*, "Abraham, the chief scribe," who rises to read it to the court. As his name indicates, Abraham was either Jewish or Christian. But his Iranian masters did not see a problem with his "ethnicity," and employed him as the chief scribe in a devoutly Zoroastrian court. We know of several grand viziers and high government officials who were non-Muslim during the Islamic phase of Iran's history. The most important of these, the grand vizier Rashid al-Din Fazlollah of Hamadān (1274-1318), may have been a convert to Islam from Judaism. Although jokes about him do exist in the literature of the period, his Jewish background did not in any way prevent him from acting as the chief administrative officer of a vast empire for many years. According to the *Shāhnāme*, the Sassanid king Anushirvan (r. 531-579) had a Christian son, who was allowed to freely practice his faith prior to his military rebellion against his father.

The tradition of tolerance for other peoples and other religions in Iran may be traced to the Achaemenid Empire. Herodotus (484-425 B.C.), who was born into a Greek speaking family in an Ionian city within the Persian Empire, describes Persians as "of all men those who most welcome foreign customs" (Bk. I:135). He tells how Darius the Great (522-486 B.C.) demonstrated to the Greek residents of his court that customs cherished by one people might be despised by another (Bk. III:38).¹⁰ Darius' tolerance of other peoples' customs and his early practice of cultural relativism is reflected in the story of Rostam's grandfather, *Garshāsp*, in the epic poem that is devoted to his adventures. In the course of his travels, Garshāsp comes upon an island where the natives customarily mutilated their noses. Assuming that someone has done this to them, the





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hero asks his guide to tell him who has punished the inhabitants by mutilating their noses. Laughing at the paladin's gullibility, the guide explains the islanders' custom by saying:

ازین گر ترا جای بخشایشست بنزدیک ایشان از آرایشست
شنیدم ز دانای فرهنگ دوست که زی هر کس آیین شهرش نکوست¹¹

You might pity them for this [custom]
But to them, this is a form of adornment
I have heard it said by the cultured sages
That every people considers its own customs the best.

Although Fritz Wolff and the other victims of Nazi atrocities were sacrificed to the myth of racial superiority, the idea of categorizing human beings by race still has a hold on the Western mind. In fact, some Western Jews, whose ancestors died by the millions under Fascism, have, like the Nazi eugenicists, begun their own search for the "Jewish Gene," and "Jewish DNA." Presumably this is to justify their connection to ancient residents of Palestine and legitimize their ongoing brutalization of the Palestinians by means of an illusory claim to their own "racial purity."¹²

The western obsession with race is a moral failure of catastrophic proportions that we Iranians would do well to avoid. Our own great poet and moralist, Sa'di (d. circa 1292), wrote in his famous *Golestān* [*The Rose Garden*]:

The sons of Adam are limbs of the same body
Because they are created of one essence.
When misfortune afflicts one limb
The other limbs grow restless.
You who have no sympathy for the troubles of others
Are unworthy of being called human.

This is a far better way of looking at ourselves and at our fellow man than the silly separation of humanity into the fictitious Aryan and Semite, or Jew and Gentile.

My point in all of this is that the *Shāhnāme* should not be abused and put into the service of the vulgar doctrine of "Aryan supremacy."





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And those who abuse the poem in this manner should be exposed as the illiterate charlatans that they are. The *Shāhnāmeḥ* is a national epic, *not* a racial or religious myth. It helps us as Iranians to be a diverse, yet distinct people, cemented into a whole by a shared tradition which defines our place in the world. It does not raise us above others. Nothing in it places us in some racial hierarchy. What's more, absolutely nothing in it belittles other peoples, their languages, cultures, or religions. In fact, some of the best verses in the poem glorify Afrāsiyāb and other Turanian warriors who are Iran's mortal enemies, and the Arab king, Monzer, who raised the Emperor Bahrām V (r. 420-438) amid his brave men, whom the poem calls "warriors of the land of tall lances." Those who attribute anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Turkish content to the *Shāhnāmeḥ* miss the poem's point altogether. They project their insecurities and second-hand racism back into Ferdowsi's sublime creation, and in the process belittle our national poet as well as all of us.

Islam was Ferdowsi's religion, regardless of what some misguided Iranians may think. The fact of the matter is that the overwhelming majority of Iranians, irrespective of their political views, adhere to the same religion as their national poet's. Because, like Christianity, Islam is a universal religion, it does not belong to Arabs or Persians or anyone else. In this respect, it is different from Zoroastrianism and Judaism, which are ethnically focused. In other words, being Muslim does not require that you belong to a specific people or ethnicity. Consequently, belief in Islam does not negate being Iranian any more than devotion to the imported religion of Christianity turns Europeans into something else. In fact, most of the Indo-European peoples of the world worship at the altar of foreign divinities. But no one expects them to revert to their pre-Christian faiths in order to remain Indo-European. It would be absurd to expect the Germans to prove their Germanic identity by casting Jesus aside in favor of the old Germanic deity, Donar, or Scandinavians to start revering Odin. Latin peoples of Europe and the Americas would be scandalized if they were expected to abandon their holy trinity and Blessed Mother for Jove and his bickering family.

Cultures change. It is in their nature to borrow ideas and adjust what they have borrowed to fit their needs. Iran adopted a new religion more





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than a millennium ago, and has made that religion her own. We have invested a great deal of ourselves in Islam. Just as the lion's share of European art, philosophy, and architecture in the late antiquity is inspired by Christianity, most of Iran's classical tradition is rooted in Islam. We cannot turn away from our Islamic heritage because some culturally alienated souls have imagined that there is a contradiction between being Iranian and being Muslim. We cannot allow voices from outside our culture to tell us who we are, when a beautiful poem already defines us so well.

In spite of all this, which should be clear to any objective observer, the erroneous notion that being Iranian and being Muslim are in conflict remains strong in the minds of far too many educated Persians in the West. Using the *Shāhnāmeh*, which they misunderstand and misrepresent, this group tends to romanticize our culture's pre-Islamic past while excoriating Islam and our largely Muslim civilization. The reasons for these self-deceptions are varied and complicated. Chief among them are feelings of inadequacy, an insidious sense of self-contempt, and an inferiority complex that many non-European cultures acquire as a result of their encounter with colonialism. It is a burden placed upon these cultures by their contact with the colonizing West. Imperialism not only plundered their resources, more importantly, it stole their self-respect. It has convinced them of their need to be confirmed, validated, or otherwise approved of by the Westerner. It defines the benchmarks that they are admonished to measure themselves by, and provides the standards by which they may judge all aspects of their culture. If their civilization fails to measure up, well, then they must be backward and inadequate. This is why many Iranian residents of the West embarrassingly try to distance themselves from Islam, their ancestral religion of a thousand years. The West has convinced them that there is something wrong with the faith of their fathers; that it is a violent, primitive and, worst of all, an unfashionable religion—a cult that stands opposed to the criterion of all civilization—namely, Western culture. These members of the Iranian diaspora have swallowed the myth hook, line and sinker. But rooted in the traditions of the *Shāhnāmeh*—a book that most Iranians have not read at all—and revering its poet, they try to drag the book and the artist out of Islam. These acolytes try to plant Ferdowsi and his poem in their





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newfound western soil, unaware that our national song will wither and die there. Poetry does not translate, and national epics do not travel well. They are too deeply rooted in their native languages and native lands.

IV. Kipling's Curse:

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), the English author and poet who perceptively wrote the famous line: "*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet*," was born in British India, and knew a thing or two about colonialism. He was a popular success during his lifetime, his stories and poems continue to be revived, and a number have been made into successful movies. Some of the most famous are *The Man Who Would Be King*, *Captains Courageous*, *Kim*, and *The Jungle Book*. In February 12, 1899, Kipling published a poem entitled "The White Man's Burden" in *McClure's Magazine*. This poem succinctly lays out the sentiments that continue to govern most Western relationships with non-European peoples. Let me quote a couple of the poem's stanzas to show you what I mean. Addressing the West, Kipling writes:

Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

Take up the White Man's burden—
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,
An Hundred times made plain,
To seek another's profit,
And work another's gain.¹³

Kipling's ballad exalts the selfless sacrifice of white men sent to civi-





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lize the natives who populate European colonies. His line, "Half-devil and half-child," is addressed to us, the descendants of ancient peoples who built the civilizations which most profoundly impacted the development of European cultures.¹⁴ Although shortly after the publication of Kipling's poem, the liberal British politician and publisher, Henry Du Pré Labouchère (1831-1912) published a response. That rejoinder never gained the popularity of Kipling's poem. Nonetheless, let me give you an idea of Labouchère's reaction to Kipling by quoting three stanzas of his piece:

Pile on the brown man's burden
To gratify your greed;
Go, clear away the "niggers"
Who progress would impede;
Be very stern, for truly
'Tis useless to be mild
With new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child.

Pile on the brown man's burden;
And, if ye rouse his hate,
Meet his old-fashioned reasons
With Maxims up to date.
With shells and dumdum bullets
A hundred times made plain
The brown man's loss must ever
Imply the white man's gain.

Pile on the brown man's burden,
Compel him to be free;
Let all your manifestoes
Reek with philanthropy.
And if with heathen folly
He dares your will dispute,
Then, in the name of freedom,
Don't hesitate to shoot.

Contrary to Labouchère's protestations, and a school of interpretation





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that insists Kipling's poem is slyly ironic satire, the notion that the "white man" has a God-given civilizing mission to drag the rest of humanity kicking and screaming out of their squalid, barbaric gloom, has, if anything, grown more dominant. But the White Man's Burden is heavier and more cumbersome on our shoulders than on his. It is not, as I pointed out before, limited to plundering riches or conquering lands. It is a burden placed upon the soul, a feeling of inadequacy and inferiority engrained upon the mind, demanding that everyone be like them, in order to be human.

In Persian literary studies in general, and especially in *Shāhnāmeh* studies, Western criteria and standards are imposed upon Persian texts that can neither be understood nor defined by them. This is not limited to Iran, or even to one area of the so-called "developing world;" and has been recognized by many perceptive Western academics. For instance, Gregory Blue and Timothy Brook write:

The historical experience of the world has been as much the history of China [or for that matter any other part of the world] as of the West. This modest fact has found recognition in the West only recently, and still only in certain circles. The dominance of models of society derived from the European experience in history and the social sciences has served to block this recognition. Too often the generalizations of social science—and this is as true in Asia as in the West—rest on the belief that the West occupies the *normative starting position* for constructing general knowledge. Almost all our categories—politics and economy, state and society, feudalism and capitalism—have been conceptualized primarily on the basis of Western historical experience.¹⁵

This submission to Western standards impacts the way we understand ourselves and our national poem. It injects ideas that are alien, both to our culture and to the text that is so central to whom we are. Iranians who impose the alien racial categories of "Aryan" vs. non-Aryan, or Zoroastrian vs. Muslim, on Ferdowsi and his poem are the colonizers' mule train. They carry the burden that the White Man placed on their backs into a culture that has no place to put it. This is not to say that the Persian culture lacks dark corners of prejudice and inequity. It clearly does; only they are not built upon racial hatred of others. And when we, as an an-





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cient people from an imperial tradition that considered diversity of race, religion, and language to be the norm, unquestionably adopt Western prejudices and even impose them on our national epic, then we subvert who we are. We become something else that is crude, barbaric, and violent rather than modern.

Had Fritz Wolff lived in Iran, he would have never been killed for having once been a Jew. But for the Germans, his conversion was not enough. He was a non-Aryan, and therefore sub-human. His murder was not a crime; it was like stepping on a bug. The Poles, the Austrians, the French, and many other “civilized” Europeans did not behave better towards millions of their countrymen whom they defined as racially inferior. Nor did civilized Americans treat most of their African slaves with humanity, or the hapless native peoples of the “New World” that they ethnically cleansed and conquered. All were fed into the insatiable maws of the White Man’s racial prejudice. It is this burden of Western barbarity and blood-lust that we would do well to shed. But insinuating some non-existent racial consciousness to the *Shāhnāme* and its author is tantamount to imposing that burden upon the most iconic text of our culture.

Even in the halcyon days of past Persian empires, inclusion went hand-in-hand with conquest. The vanquished were not viewed as racially inferior to the Persians, nor were they treated with the kind of contempt and abuse that Westerners continue to heap upon those whom they subjugate. As Patrick J. Geary puts it:

The Medes and later the Persians could conquer Asia without affecting the status of the peoples who inhabited it. In part, this was the result of the Persian system of government, which *generally sought not to destroy local elites or political institutions, but to co-opt them*.¹⁶

Tradition, from the Latin *trāditio*, literally means “handing something down, delivering, passing on.” It implies following a way of doing things that has been received from the previous generations. Persian uses the Arabic loan-word, *sonnat* (سُنَّت) to express this notion. And *sonnat* also implies following a code of conduct that is prescribed by past generations. As modern technology removes all obstacles to cultural exchange





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on a global scale, we would be wise to understand that the waves of time cannot be rolled back. The past is a country to which none may return, but the shared memories of the past, cherished and remembered, may be a serviceable substitute. The *Shāhnāme* is a magnificent poetic expression of our shared memories from an ancient time. In the beautiful phrase of Australian aborigines, it is the story of our *dreamtime*; and in that *dreamtime* there is no room for the nightmares of bigotry and intolerance. Those who fail to understand this crucial fact about Persian culture are condemned to carry the White Man's Burden. They are destined to hate not only others, but more tragically, themselves and their own culture among the "others" whom they define as inferior.

ENDNOTES

- 1 I should point out that the case of the Turks is somewhat different from other Middle Eastern populations, because their large-scale immigration into the Middle East took place long *after* the Muslim conquest, and their experience with Islam was a different experience that does not concern us here.
- 2 For a sensible discussion of this notion see: S. M. Stern, "Ya'qūb the Coppersmith and Persian National Sentiment," in *Iran and Islam. In Memory of the Late V. Minorsky*, ed. C. E. Bosworth (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1971), pp. 536-537.
- 3 Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), pp. 50-51.
- 4 This story is usually called "The Story of Garshāsp," and has been repeatedly translated from the Middle Persian. See for instance:
بررسی دستنویس م. او ۲۹: داستان گرشاسب، تهمورس و جمشید گلشاه و متن های دیگر.
آوانویسی و ترجمه از متن پهلوی، کتابون مزداپور (تهران: آگاه، ۱۳۷۸)، صص ۱۵۲-۱۲۱.
- 5 See Sorour Soroudi, "Islamization of the Iranian National Hero Rostam as Reflected in Persian Folktales," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*. 2 (1980): 365-383. For the Persian texts of many of these stories see:
ابوالقاسم انجوی. فردوسی نامه، ۳ مجلد (چاپ دوم، تهران: علمی ۱۳۶۳)، ج ۱، صص ۲۹۵، ۲، صص ۱۲۷-۱۰۷، ۲۹۶-۲۹۷، ج ۳، صص ۶۵، ۱۷۰، ۱۸۲-۱۷۷.
- 6 For the clip of the performance see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7rIFpUhziE>, retrieved on February 19, 2010 from the Youtube website.
- 7 ابوسعید عبدالحی بن الضحاک بن محمود گردیزی. زین الاخبار. به تصحیح عبدالحی حبیبی (تهران: بنیاد فرهنگ، ۱۳۴۷)، ص ۱۹۰.
- 8 See R. Schmitt's article on *Aryans* and H. R. Bailey's entry on *Arya* in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.
- 9 Kent, *Old Persian Grammar*, p.138.
- 10 See Geary, Patrick. J. *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.46.





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- 11 گزاشپنامه ص ۱۷۱ ب ۱۲-۱۱.
- 12 See <http://www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/jewish-genetics>, retrieved on February 21, 2010.
- 13 Kipling, Rudyard. *The Writings in Prose and Verse of Rudyard Kipling* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), vol.21, p.78.
- 14 The case is cogently argued by the Swiss classicist Walter Burkert in his influential book, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*. Translated by W. Burkert and M. E. Pinder (Cambridge/Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- 15 Blue, G. and Brook, T. "Introduction," in Gregory Blue and Timothy Brook (eds.) *China and Historical Capitalism: Genealogies of Sinological Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.1.
- 16 Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, p.45.





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